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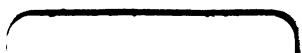
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ANDROMEDA

AN IDYLL OF THE GREAT RIVER

BY

ROBERT BUCHANAN

AUTHOR OF

'THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD,' 'GOD AND THE MAN,' ETC.



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ANDROMEDA.

CHAPTER I.

ART ON CANVEY ISLAND.

EARLY in the fifth decade of the present century, when the quaint fairy Crinolina was waving her wand over merry England and transforming its fair women into funny reproductions of their ancestresses under good Queen Bess; when young townsmen wore white hats and peg-top trousers, and when nearly every house boasted its dismal array of horsehair-stuffed chairs and sofas covered with that most horrible invention the antimacassar—early, that is to say, in the married life of her Majesty Queen Victoria, there stood in the loneliest part of Canvey Island, at the mouth of the Thames, a solitary tumble-down inn, called the Lobster Smack.

Its landlord was a certain Job Endell, who had

once been a deep-sea mariner and, if report did not greatly belie him, a savage sea-dog and pirate ; its patrons and customers, few and far between, were such fishermen, bargees, lightermen, and riverside characters as were driven in their various vessels by stress of weather or freaks of the tide into the little muddy haven close to the inn door. From time to time the little inn resounded with the merriment of such wayfarers, but as a rule it was as deserted as its surroundings, and the aforesaid Job Endell was the lonely monarch of all he surveyed.

Now and then, however, Job had the privilege of entertaining a stray visitor from London, attracted thither by the chances of fishing in the river or sea-bird shooting in the creeks or along the sea-wall ; and at the time when our story opens two such visitors, who combined the profession of Art with the pleasures of cheap sport, were occupying the only habitable guest-chambers in the inn. The little dark parlour was lumbered with their guns, their fishing-rods, and their nets, as well as with the paraphernalia of their profession—easels, brushes, mahl-sticks, finished and unfinished canvases, sketch-books, pipes, and cigar-boxes.

The owners of this flotsam and jetsam had been in possession of the place for weeks, and, as they

gave little or no trouble, were satisfied with the simplest fare, and paid liberally enough for their board and accommodation, they were in high favour with the grim old landlord and his wife. They had arrived there one day during early summer in a small yawl-rigged yacht, which 'took the ground' at low water and floated at high tide, and they had lingered on, sailing, boating, fishing, sketching, until the summer was well advanced.

Canvey Island exists still, and so, curiously enough, does the Lobster Smack; and even to-day, when the neighbouring shores of Kent and Essex are covered with new colonies and ever-increasing resorts of the tourist, Canvey is practically *terra incognita*, and its one house of public entertainment as solitary and desolate as ever. Flat as a map, so intermingled with creeks and runlets that it is difficult to say where water ends and land begins, Canvey Island lies, a shapeless octopus, right under the high ground of Benfleet and Hadleigh, and stretches out muddy and slimy feelers to touch and dabble in the deep water of the flowing Thames.

Away across the marshes rise the ancient ruins of Hadleigh Castle; further eastward, the high spire and square tower of Leigh Church; and still further eastward, the now flourishing town of Southend, called by its enemies Southend-on-Mud.

There is plenty of life yonder, and sounds of life ; the railway has opened up every spot, and in the track of the railway has followed the cheap tourist and the Salvation Army ; but down here on Canvey Island everything is still as silent, as lonely, and as gruesome as it was fifty or a hundred years ago—nay, as it was a thousand years past, ere the walls of Hadleigh had fallen into ruin, and when the loopholes of the castle commanded all approaches of the enemy from the shore or the deep sea.

In front of the Lobster Smack, under the shade of a large white umbrella, a man sat before an easel, painting. The light came over his shoulder from the north, and he faced the little creek and the river beyond. The sun was sinking over the marshes and the river towards Gravesend, and the air was still baking hot after a blazing summer's day.

The artist was a man of over forty years of age, with a grayish beard and moustache, and a black patch over his left eye. His face was stern and somewhat cynical, but when he smiled, which he did from time to time, his expression was grimly good-humoured. He wore a loose painting blouse of white linen, thrown over his ordinary suit ; on his head, which was as bald as a billiard-ball, was cocked a wide-awake felt hat, and in his mouth was a short clay pipe.

He was painting a portrait, with the careless yet precise touches which showed the skill of the master. The subject of the portrait sat before him in a cane-bottomed chair, and was no other than Mr. Job Endell, the landlord of the inn.

Nearer seventy than sixty years of age, with bushy white eyebrows, little keen black eyes, a face the colour of mahogany, a low forehead, an eagle beak, and a sharp slit of a mouth, short and broad, with stooping shoulders, short legs, and arms which seemed to have been made for a man twice his size, they were so long and out of proportion—such was the landlord. For the rest, he wore a loose flannel shirt, breeches, and long sea-boots, while a red flannel nightcap covered his gray head.

‘Getting on, master?’ observed Endell, leaning forward and resting his large freckled hands on his knees. ‘I don’t wish to hurry ye, but I want to go Benfleet ways, and pick up a rabbit.’

‘Keep still another ten minutes,’ grunted the painter, ‘and I shall have seen as much of your ugly mug as I need to!’ He added a few dexterous touches, while the old man grinned; then he continued, pipe in mouth: ‘If your looks don’t libel you, Endell, what an old scoundrel you must have been!’

The landlord grinned again, not at all offended.

‘Allays fond o’ your joke, Mister Bufton,’ he chuckled. ‘Well, I don’t deny I’ve been a rum un in my time—fond of a glass, and fond of the gels, both the black uns and the white uns. I’ve taken my fun where I found it, and I’m game to take it still.’

‘Humph!’ the painter returned, looking, with the black patch over his eye, as wicked as his interlocutor. ‘How long did you say you’ve been living on this infernal island?’

‘Fifteen years come Christmas, sir. I’d just come ashore arter my last voyage to South Ameriky, and, what with aguer and rheumatics and a touch of the yellow fever, I was pretty nigh too played out for living on weevelled biscuit and salt junk ; so, as I’d saved a bit, thinks I, “I’ll lock out for some nice little pub where I can settle down.” Then a mate of mine says to me, says he, “I knows the werry place to suit ye,” and he brought me here, and I bought the goodwill of the crib, where I’ve resided ever since.’

‘Right sort of hole for an old cut-throat like you, Endell.’

‘There’s mor’n me fond on it, Mister Bufton,’ returned Endell, with another self-satisfied grin—‘gents from London, like yourself and Mister Somerset. They likes the quiet, and the views, and the sport roundabouts, and the wonderful

hair. There ain't such hair in all England as comes in from the sea over them marshes. Why, it set you up in no time, sir! You're twice the man you was when you come here.'

'D'ye know why I came, old man?'

'Why, for the good o' your health, o' course'

'Rot! It was to dodge the bailiffs and bilk the tax-gatherer. You took in the friendless orphan, you old ruffian, and found him a God-send, though you tried at first to poison him with bad spirits and coarse beer. There,' the speaker added, rising to his feet, 'that'll do. You can take away your piratical figure-head to scare the curlews!'

The landlord jumped up eagerly, and then, coming in front of the canvas, looked at the picture with complete approval.

'It's werry like me,' he remarked critically. 'I should know it anywheres. What are you going to do with it, Mister Bufton?—make a present on it to my old missis?'

Bufton cocked his uncovered eye at the landlord, and rapped out a cheerful oath. It is to be noted that this gentleman's general conversation was liberally studded with expletives, the greater part of which we shall take the liberty to suppress.

'I'm going to keep it, Endell,' he replied, 'as a study for a larger picture—"Davy Jones opening

his Locker," "James Avery the Pirate boarding an East Indiaman," or something of that sort. It'll come in handily whenever I want something in the Cain line, full of blood and murder.'

'All right, sir,' said Endell cheerfully, as he trotted off towards the inn door, by the side of which his gun, an old Joe Manton, was lying.

'Where's Mr. Somerset?' the painter called out.

'I ain't seen him since the forenoon, sir, when I see him a-going along the sea-wall.'

'Lazy young devil!' muttered Bufton.

By this time the old man had shouldered his gun, and was preparing to follow the rough foot-path which wound inland across the island. He had only gone a few yards when he stopped short and looked at the painter.

'I forgot to tell ye, sir, our gel's coming back to-night.'

'Girl? What girl?'

'Our gel,' returned Endell, with a curious smile. 'She waits on the customers when she's here, and makes herself generally useful.'

'Your daughter, d'ye mean?'

'No, sir, she's no darter o' mine, though me an' the missis has helped to bring her up. She's been staying at Rayleigh Parsonage with one of the young ladies, learning sewing and reading and

writing, and rubbish o' that sort, and now she's a-coming home for good. I know what you'll say when you see her, Mister Bufton. "I wants to paint that gel"—that's what you'll say.'

'Oh, indeed! Is she such a wonder?'

'I say naught as to that, mister; all I knows is that she's a strapping lass, with a pair of eyes in her head as bold and fine as ever you see. A painter chap come down here last summer and drew her wonderful, but he wasn't a slap-bang painter like you.'

As the old man spoke, his eyes fell on the form of a young man, dressed in a light-gray shooting-suit and Panama hat, who was slowly emerging from the marshes.

'There's Mister Somerset,' he cried, with a jerk of the elbow.

Bufton glanced towards the new-comer, and strolling to a form in front of the inn, sat down and awaited his arrival.

A handsome, powerful-looking fellow, at least fifteen years Bufton's junior, with a frank, open face, a thoughtful forehead, fair hair and light moustache; he carried a sketch-book in one hand and a camp-stool in the other—this was Charles Somerset, artist and Bohemian, like his friend, but, unlike his friend, a bit of a dandy.

'Where the thunder have you been?' growled

Buften as the other strolled up—only the word he used was a stronger one than ‘thunder.’

‘Right over to the woods above Pitsea,’ answered Somerset. ‘Oh, Billy, such a sunset! Old Turner never painted one to touch it, and Ruskin would have drivelled pages at the merest glimpse of it!’

‘The sun hasn’t been setting all day, and you’ve been away since breakfast.’

‘True, Billy,’ returned the young man airily. ‘The remark shows your usual perspicacity. To be quite frank, I wanted a girl for a model, and I thought I’d discover if any rural beauty was wasting her sweetness on the desert air of Pitsea.’

‘I thought so,’ observed Buften—‘idling as usual, and running after the petticoats!’

The young man seated himself on the form by his friend’s side, and drew out a meerschaum pipe, which he proceeded to light. Then he smiled slyly, and winked at his companion.

‘Well,’ said Buften, answering the smile with another, ‘any luck?’

Somerset shook his head.

‘No, Billy Buften, A.R.A.,’ was his reply. ‘Women seem nearly as scarce over there as here—at least, women under the age of fifty. The bashful village maiden of poets and painters doesn’t seem to grow among the marshes, and as

it's nearly six weeks since I've seen a female countenance, except old Mother Endell's, I'm seriously thinking of chucking it and returning to the beauties of Bloomsbury.'

'Look here, youngster, we came down here to paint, not to gallivant! You lazy beggar! you've not done a decent day's work since you arrived, and I've done my "Crépuscule" and two pot-boilers!'

The young man laughed gaily.

'You're different, Billy—you're a fogey, and an A.R.A. In a year or two, when you're, say, seventy, you'll be a full-blown Academician. I'm a young thing, and need distraction; what's more, I'll be hanged if I don't have it!'

'Bosh!'

'It may be bosh, Billy, but it's human nature. I can't paint unless I'm inspired!'

'You can't paint in any case!'

'That's rude, Billy; but I set it down to artistic jealousy. I repeat that I can't paint unless I'm inspired, and to inspire me I need a model!'

'Write for Polly Castle or little Juanna, the organ-grinder's daughter. Either of 'em 'll come fast enough.'

'Now you're immoral,' cried Somerset, shrugging his shoulders and proceeding in the same style of banter. 'Besides, I'm sick of your horrid pro-

fessional creatures who hire themselves out at so much an hour, drinks not included. I want freshness, purity, simplicity ; and alas ! Nature doesn't seem to manufacture them down here.'

The sun now hung like a great crimson ball on the edge of the marshes, filling the air with many-coloured lights and flashing brightly on the faces of the two men. Bufton rose and pocketed his pipe.

'What rot you're talking !' he cried. 'Why, you couldn't draw a woman if you'd the chance ; you know about as much about the figure as I do about Hebrew ; and, mind you, it's that want of knowledge which plays dicky even with your landscapes.'

'Turner can't draw the figure, Billy, yet Ruskin says——'

'Ruskin be —— ! A man who talks about Art without having learned its rudiments, and who thinks a picture is a sermon, or a sermon is a picture ! Take my tip, sonny, and understand that even a landscape painter can't get on without first perfecting himself in figure-drawing, and that the best preparation of all for him is the antique marble and the modern nude !'

'Of course !' cried the other innocently, opening his blue eyes wide. 'That's just what I think, Billy ; and it's the very reason why——'

‘Oh, hang your chaff!’ said Bufton, pushing him aside. ‘I’m going in to have some grub.’ So saying, he entered the inn, followed by his laughing friend.

The two men who have just been introduced to the reader had been close companions for several years, and, despite the difference in their ages and temperaments, were sincerely attached to each other. They shared a large desolate-looking studio in London, a studio which was the abode of the elder man as well as his place for work. Somerset, though he had very little money, had wealthy relations, with one of whom he lived and boarded. He was not, in the strict sense of the word, an amateur, for he did careful and persistent work as an artist ; but he had some of the amateur’s limitations, and he had not learned to take his profession seriously.

William Edward Bufton, on the other hand, was one of those born artists who seem to have come into the world brush in hand, with no object in life but to paint pictures. After years of study on the Continent under the best masters, years of the greatest penury and privation, he had mastered all the technique of his craft, and had returned to England, at two-and-thirty years of age, full of the highest hopes and aspirations.

Of his genius there could be no question ; un-

fortunately for his pocket, it was associated with an eccentricity and an audacity which persistently alienated both critics and picture-dealers. Everybody admitted his power and cleverness, while deploring his methods. He was, in fact, an impressionist—at a time when impressionism was an unknown quantity—and his works were as caviare to the general or to the individual purchaser as those of Millet or Courbet or any of his compeers. Nowadays, of course, when pictures by ‘the late W. E. Bufton’ are often sold for fabulous prices, it is hard to believe that the man who painted them had, when living, the utmost difficulty in earning his daily bread.

To further increase his ill-luck, had come, in later years, great personal unpopularity. His opinions were so strong, so strongly expressed, and so destructive of the reputations of many fashionable artists, that he was very generally avoided and disliked. Until Somerset had joined him, he had lived alone, and practically friendless ; and as a consequence of this isolation he had acquired the habit of bursting out at intervals in the wildest and most intemperate manner, drinking deeply, frequently in the worst of company, and often closing the orgy by an appearance in the police-court.

During his long spells of hard work he drank

nothing, or almost nothing, but directly the fit was on him, and the moment for one of his 'sprees,' as he called them, had come, he lost all self-control, and not unfrequently acted as if he were raving mad.

'Poor Bufton!' his fellow-artists would say. 'No one can dispute the fact of his talent, but he is such a thorough Bohemian! What a pity that his is such a wasted life!'

Those who spoke thus of him only saw the man on his darkest and most ignoble side, and knew nothing of the deep and steadfast devotion with which, during the best part of his life, he studied, thought, and painted. He had the misfortune, as we have explained, to be in advance of his time, both in talent and genius. The hour for his apotheosis had not yet come.

CHAPTER II.

A VISION IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE cloth was laid in the small inn-parlour, an old-fashioned chamber, furnished with a table and two or three wooden chairs, a high chest of oak, which served as a sideboard, a square of carpet, a broken mirror, round the edge of which was draped some flimsy yellow gauze, and two old arm-chairs, one on each side of the fireplace. Two or three wood engravings, cut from newspapers and representing battles by land and sea, were stuck on the walls. In every corner were scattered the personal impedimenta of the two guests, so that it was difficult to navigate the room without tumbling over canvases, paint-boxes, brushes, fishing-rods, or portmanteaus.

A grim little old woman in a very clean cotton gown was placing knives and forks on the table. Her face was wrinkled and weather-beaten, her

eyes keen and shrewd, but her expression not unkindly. She looked up as Bufton entered the room, followed by his companion.

‘Your dinner’s nigh ready,’ she said.

‘That’s right,’ cried Bufton. ‘You can serve it as soon as you like, mother, and the sooner the better, for I’m infernally hungry. I say, mother,’ he added, ‘the youngster is talking about cutting his stick and going back to London.’

The old woman glanced at Somerset, who had seated himself, humming a tune, on the sill of the open window.

‘Well, I don’t wonder,’ she said. ‘The Lobster Smack’s a poor place for the likes of him! I’ve done my best to make ye comfortable, gentlemen, but Canvey isn’t London.’

‘Ah, but you don’t know his reason for wanting to go,’ continued Bufton, standing with his back to the fireplace. ‘He complains that our society isn’t sufficiently attractive, mother, and that he wants something more stimulating.’

‘Don’t believe him,’ interrupted Somerset, laughing. ‘All I said was that I was hard up for a model.’

‘Just so,’ said Bufton, with a wink. ‘Hard up for a model, with *you* dying to sit for him!’

Mrs. Endell glanced from one to the other, and shook her head indignantly.

‘You’re a couple of radicals, allus full of your imperence. Me a model! I’ve heerd tell o’ them shameless hussies, and we don’t take no count on ’em down hereaways;’ and with a toss of her head she left the room.

A little later the two men sat at table enjoying a plain but well-cooked meal of three courses: flounders caught that morning, a boiled leg of mutton, and a pudding, with cheese and water-cress to follow. Somerset drank ale, served in the tankard; Bufton, just then on his good behaviour, took only water.

The simple meal over, the men had lit their pipes, and Mrs. Endell was clearing away, when Bufton cried suddenly:

‘Oh, by the way, mother, who’s the young lady who is soon going to join our family party?’

The old woman looked at him in wonder, peering at him sharply out of her keen dark eyes.

‘Bless the man! what’s he a-talking about?’ she exclaimed. ‘There’s no young lady a-coming ’ere as I knows on.’

‘Well, the “gel,” as Job called her—“our gel,” who has been staying over at Rayleigh.’

The woman’s expression changed instantly and ominously. Her face darkened, her eyes grew hard, and her mouth was grimly set.

Her ‘Never you mind about her,’ she muttered.

‘But we do mind—at least, my friend minds. He’s interested, frantically interested, in everything feminine.’

Mrs. Endell’s face grew still darker.

‘Endell’s a fool—a born fool!’ she said. ‘What did he tell ’ee?’

‘Just what I’ve told you—that the young woman may be expected at any moment.’

‘She ain’t expected neither,’ returned the old woman sharply. ‘I’ve bidden her bide away till you’ve cleared out; and I suppose you ain’t a-going yet awhile?’

Somerset, who had been listening in surprise to the conversation, now broke in.

‘Hang me if I know what you’re talking about! What girl? What young woman?’

‘Never mind,’ cried Mrs. Endell; ‘it’s only more o’ Mr. Bufton’s imperence!’

Suddenly as she spoke she became aware of her husband, who had just appeared at the open door and was looking into the room. She turned on him like a tigress.

‘What ha’ you been a-saying to the gentlemen about a girl comin’ over from Rayleigh, you old thief of the world? Allus with your silly mouth open, you big baby, and can’t keep nothin’ to yourself! What ha’ you been a-saying?’

‘Nowt,’ returned Endell, with a scowl—‘nowt

but the truth, anyways. Anniedromedy's a-coming home.'

'Coming home?' repeated his wife. 'When?'

'To-night, for all I knows on,' answered Endell sulkily. 'Or maybe to-morrow. Or maybe the day arter. When she pleases. She's sent a message to say she can't stay over there no more.'

So saying, with a nod to his guests, the landlord disappeared, followed quickly by his wife, who seemed curiously excited. They retired to a room beyond the desolate bar, and their voices could still be heard in the distance, now raised angrily, now sunk in whispers.

Left alone, the two friends looked at one another.

'There's a mystery here, youngster,' said Bufton.

'There's a gal, at any rate,' returned Somerset. 'He called her "Anniedromedy." Sounds rather Greek—Perseus and Andromeda, you know.'

'And Mother Endell for the dragon!' growled Bufton; and walking towards the fireplace, he took a book from the mantelpiece, sat down in one of the arm-chairs, and began to read.

It was now quite dark. The last dim gleams of the almost tropical sunset had faded from the western sky, and over the horizon, on a bed of

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dim greenish daffodil, the summer moon had risen, growing more and more luminous every moment, as twilight deepened into night. Gazing through the open window, through which the air stole warm and heavy with the scent of sea-grass and weed, Somerset saw the creek filled almost to overflowing with the spring tide and glancing like mother-of-pearl in the brightening moon-rays. Black against the sky loomed the silhouette of the little yawl, now floating and swinging at anchor, and out beyond, in the shadow for the most part, but with here and there a glimmer of reflected moonlight, lay the Great River. All was completely still, save for the occasional cry of a curlew passing onward to join the flocks at rest on the marshes till low water. Brighter and brighter grew the moon, rising higher in the heavens, and shedding further ablutions of silver light, till all the skies seemed flooded with her beams, while the shimmering tide crept closer and closer to wash her radiant feet.

‘By Jove!’ cried Somerset, enraptured. ‘Come and look at the moonlight, Billy; it’s simply wonderful!’

Bufton did not stir.

‘Shut up, and let me read,’ he muttered, settling himself in his chair.

‘Nonsense!’ persisted the young man. ‘Come

for a stroll. It's a positive sin to be indoors on such an evening.'

Buften made no reply. As a matter of fact, he was tired and weary, for he had been hard at work in the open air all day ; for the rest, he was, like many another of his class, more or less insensible to the charms of Nature on the sentimental side. His genius was practical and creative, not consciously emotional. It has been much the same with many great artists—with Turner, for example, and with Millais. Though their work was highly imaginative, their personality was somewhat commonplace.

It was very different with Somerset. The blood of five-and-twenty was warm in his veins, and he was alive to all tender influences ; nor had the artistic sense deadened, as it not unfrequently does, his susceptibility to the glamour of the world surrounding him. So it happened that, without another word of remonstrance, he seized his hat and wandered out into the open air.

He had not exaggerated when he had spoken of the wonderful beauty of the night. Troops of strange stars had gathered now in the wake of the luminous moon in the west, and overhead the Milky Way was throbbing, sown thick with lights as a summer field with cowslips and daisies. All the heaven was alive, and its rapturous brightness

made the earth beneath seem blacker and blacker, save where the water was mother-o'-pearled with moonlight and starlight, and edged with ripples of argent foam.

Standing in the shadow of the old inn, Somerset looked across the creek towards the river. Far away across it dim red lights were twinkling on the coast of Kent. Shadows went and came. Then there was a deep sea sound from the distance, and a black tug went by, churning up the phosphorescence with its paddle-wheels and dragging behind it the blacker shadow of a great ship. Somerset stood and listened, as the sound grew fainter and fainter, dying away up the river.

Familiar with every portion of the island, he wandered inland among the innumerable creeks, every one of which was full and overflowing with the tide. Warm summer air, scented with the breath of the sea-lavender, was wafted to him from the marshes and half-flooded saltings. A heron passed slowly overhead, with that strong waft of wing which is so swift yet seems so leisurely. Far away towards the Flats of Leigh sounded the faint, troubled cries of the curlews.

Presently he gained the sea-wall, which protects the central marshes from the full force of tide and sea, and climbing up on its loose chalk and shingle, strolled slowly onward in the direction of the open

sea. The moon was now at his back, but its rays ran before him, now flashing like a torch on the water, now dipped in momentary gloom. On either side of the wall the water was slipping and murmuring ; it was real sea-water now, salt with the brine of ocean, and strong as that flowing round the lightship at the distant Nore. Eastward all was shadowy, but the lights burnt here and there, many moving slowly up stream. Away to the south-east the river broadened into an estuary, bordered on the one side by the dark shores of Essex, and on the other by the low-lying hills of Kent.

The night was sultry as it was still. Over the land, the water, the marshes and saltings, hung a warm white vapour, the very breath of the sleeping earth.

Slowly and dreamily, pursuing his own thoughts, the young man wandered on, and at every step he took the loneliness grew greater, the silence intenser. At last he sat down on the side of the sea-wall, lit his pipe, and resigned himself to meditation.

Can we guess his thoughts? Let us try.

His imagination, as was inevitable, seeing the nature of his education, was haunted by masterpieces he had seen and books that he had read. To him moonlight meant Art and Poetry, and Art and Poetry meant shapes of marble, fair painted

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forms, and scraps of enchanted verse. Sitting there alone, he murmured to himself the witching lines of Wordsworth, only just come to his rightful kingdom in the realms of song. 'The world is too much with us!' he repeated, and as he did so he saw the sea 'baring its bosom to the moon,' as in the poem, and continued :

“Great Lord ! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn ;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
And hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn !”

Yes, that was his fancy, the fancy of so many that are young and glad, and who find the world bereft of the old sweet supernaturalism. He longed to be a Greek—to live in a land haunted by the beautiful shapes of fancy, the wondrous shapes of old mythology ; and yet there he sat, a tired Londoner, bored to death, and longing to get back to the busy whirl of life. It was the nineteenth century, not the morning of the world ; it was Canvey Island, and not ancient Greece. The gods and goddesses had flown for ever, and even Puck and the quaint forms of fairyland had vanished too.

Suddenly his heart leapt within him, and he started in surprise, almost in terror.

Under the sea-wall, on the side on which he

had stretched himself, lay a creek of moonlit water ; across it, almost fifty yards away, rose a grass-covered slope leading to shadowy sea-meadows ; and suddenly, moving rapidly in the water below him, and floating up the creek, he saw—what? Did his eyes deceive him? Was he mad or dreaming? Of course it was impossible, but it seemed to his excited vision like the form of some living being! Something white like marble! Arms stretched out softly, and oaring the still stream ; a form submerged, yet dimly shining through the water as it swam along ; and above, the moonlight shining down upon it, a face set in black hair, which fell like seaweed over ivory shoulders!

He rubbed his eyes in amazement ; then he looked again. The vision was still there!

As he looked, the shape turned with a sound like human laughter, and began to swim slowly back the way it had come. It passed beneath him, gleaming in the moonlight.

He trembled and held his breath! He was not dreaming. What he saw was real, and the shape that was swimming past him in the warm summer night was the shape of a Woman!

Woman or goddess? A human creature like himself, or some strange visitor from the haunted realms of fancy? His mind had been full of the

old superstition ; he had been dreaming of ancient Hellas, and now it seemed as if his wish had been granted, and some strange naiad or sea-maiden had come from the darkness to rebuke his unbelief.

The thought was only momentary, and Somerset was not poet enough to deceive himself long in a matter to be easily determined by the senses. Almost instantly he began to realize the humour as well as the poetry of the situation, and it was with difficulty he suppressed an amazed whistle. The plain prose of the affair instantly appeared to him. A human being, to all intents and purposes of the feminine sex, was having a bath by moonlight. Who the deuce could she be ?

As he asked himself the question, the vision disappeared round a bend of the sea-wall. Quite certain that his proximity had not been suspected, Somerset rose softly to his feet, and crept forward in a stooping position in the direction she had taken. His conduct, of course, was not to be excused ; as a moral young man, he ought to have rushed away in the opposite direction ; but as veracious chroniclers, we are bound to record the truth, that curiosity prevailed over propriety, and he wanted to discover who the person was and whence she came. Besides, he was still affected to some extent by the old superstitious

ideas which had been running through his mind. If she was a Spirit after all—a Goddess of the Sea, a Water-fairy!

Determined to solve the mystery, he crept to the bend where the swimmer had disappeared, and, crouching down, looked stealthily along the creek.

At that moment, to his annoyance, the moon was hidden by a cloud, and there was comparative darkness. He strained his eyes, but saw nothing, though he heard, or seemed to hear, a sound as of something splashing gently in the water. Suddenly, with lightning brilliance, the moon swept out again into the open heaven, and then, O wonder! O dreams of loveliness and Hellas! he saw another vision which filled his soul with awe and admiration.

Standing eighty or ninety yards away, on a small grassy promontory communicating with the sea-wall, was a form like a statue of white marble, dripping with silver dewdrops and glimmering in the full rays of the moon. Psyche emerging from her bath, Venus Aphrodite rising from the sea, could not have startled him more. To paraphrase the words of the sweetest of all English love poems, Somerset

‘Grew faint—

She stood, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint!’

Yes, it was no dream, but a strange and startling reality. He could not discover, of course, in the dimness of the moonlight what the face was like, whether it was that of a girl or a woman advanced in years ; but the form was tall, slight, and beautiful, and seemed without a flaw.

She was bending slightly forward, half-covered, 'like a mermaid in seaweed,' by her dripping hair, from which she was wringing the water with her hands ; and her face was averted, while her eyes seemed to be searching the distant sky. She paused and listened. The dull sound of the heavy paddles of a distant steamboat broke upon the night, and then, suddenly, the hoarse cry of a heron sailing past, and startled by her presence. She laughed lightly, ran up into the shadow of the sea-wall, and disappeared from sight.

Scarcely knowing what to do, Somerset deliberated. It was quite clear to him now that he was taking undue advantage of an accident, and that he had no right to investigate the mystery further. The person, whoever she was, had no suspicion whatever that any 'peeping Tom' had been watching her ; and if she did know she would, of course, be naturally indignant. Yet who on earth could she be, taking a sea-bath at that hour, and in a place so solitary ? Save for

a few straggling shepherds' huts, the island was almost untenanted, and the place where he stood was the loneliest place of all the island. He stood hesitating, and wondered and wondered.

All was now silent. The vision did not reappear. The moon shone on, the stars twinkled, but that was all.

At last, eager to solve the mystery, Somerset decided to stroll on along the sea-wall; but this time, determined to give the stranger, if she should be anywhere in hearing, due warning of his approach, he whistled as he went—whistled the gay tune of a nigger melody then very popular, and paused from time to time to look carelessly at the stars. His chivalry and delicacy were successful: he saw no more of the shining vision, and he was beginning to feel that it might have been all a mere fancy, when he heard a faint sound like a splash of oars, and saw shooting away along a distant part of the creek a small boat, rowed rapidly by a solitary form. He was too far away to distinguish whether the rower was man or woman, and before he approached nearer both boat and form had shot into the shadows and disappeared.

Although the mystery now seemed satisfactorily explained, in so far that it was clear that what he had seen was nothing supernatural, he was still

greatly interested and puzzled, and, eager to retail his adventure to the companion of his solitude, he hastened back to the inn.

He found Bufton dozing in the arm-chair by the fire.

‘Oh, Billy, such an adventure!’ he cried, closing the door behind him and facing his friend with flushed cheek and flashing eyes. ‘I’ve seen——’

‘What have you seen, you moon-struck idiot?’ returned the cynic.

‘A vision! an apparition! Billy, I’m a jolly young Greek and not a Cockney! And this isn’t Essex, it’s a part of ancient Hellas!’

‘Eh? You’ve been drinking!’

‘I have—at the very fountain of the Muses! And then—oh, Billy, “out of the Baths of Night came the divine one, naked and beautiful!”’

‘What?’ growled Bufton. ‘Whom are you talking about?’

‘Aphrodite! Astarte!’ answered Somerset, smiling delightedly. ‘Venus Anadyomene! the Goddess of Canvey Island!’

CHAPTER III.

ENTER ANDROMEDA.

AT first, of course, Bufton thought that his friend was merely romancing, in the light-hearted manner of youth. To convince him that this was not the case, the young man described his adventure fully, expatiating on all the details.

‘You’d been dining, youngster,’ observed Bufton, when he had heard everything.

‘My dear Billy, I’d only had a pint of bitter ale, and I was as sober as a judge. I saw exactly what I have described, and am entirely at a loss what to make of it. Save for the circumstance of the boat, I should be inclined to think that the whole thing was supernatural ; but goddesses and water-spirits don’t go about in boats, and I’m convinced that what I saw was flesh and blood.’

‘Rum affair,’ muttered Bufton, ‘if you’re not lying.’

‘I’m telling you the simple truth. Who the deuce could the person have been?’

‘Young bargee, perhaps, having a bath by moonlight.’

‘Absurd!’ cried Somerset indignantly. ‘I tell you it was a woman.’

‘Female labourer from one of the marsh farms, having her annual wash!’

‘There are no farms in that direction and no females. It’s the most desolate and out-of-the-way part of all the island. Suppose we call in old Endell and consult him? He may be able to explain matters.’

‘Endell’s busy,’ said Bufton, nodding his head towards the room-door, through which there came the murmur of loud laughter and gruff voices. A party of men from Gravesend had landed from a barge, and, joined by some fishermen from Leigh, was thronging the tap-room which adjoined the bar.

‘I should keep Endell out of it for the present,’ continued Bufton. ‘He’ll only think we’re chaffing, as usual. Wait till morning, youngster; your wits will be clearer, and we may hear something.’

So it was decided, and presently the two friends retired to rest in their rooms upstairs, two small but habitable chambers which the old woman of

the house had made fairly comfortable. Long after they had retired the noise continued to come from below, but at last the last wayfarer was thrust out, the door closed and bolted, and silence reigned in the Lobster Smack.

Too excited to rest, Somerset remained for hours *en déshabillé*, smoking and gazing out into the night. The window of his room commanded the little haven and the dark reaches of the adjoining river. He watched dark ships passing to and fro, with strange, ghostly sounds in the darkness ; barges and fishing-boats drifting down with the tide ; lights flashing and moving ; and over all the moon, still radiant, rising higher and higher towards the zenith. But his thoughts were elsewhere—far away in the old world of Fable, or down among the lonely marshes where his dream of the Past seemed to have assumed a human form and likeness.

At last, tired and weary, he slipped into bed. He was just dropping off, when he heard feet moving and voices murmuring outside his bedroom door.

‘Quiet!’ said a voice which he recognised as that of his landlord—‘quiet, or you’ll wake the gentlemen.’

Another voice replied in a whisper ; it seemed too clear for that of the old dame, but that,

Somerset thought, was only his fancy. The next moment he was fast asleep, dreaming that he was Adonis the hunter, or some such happy creature of old days, chasing the Goddess of Love and Beauty through the moonlit groves. Again and again he came near and was about to seize her in his arms, but again and again she vanished laughing, despite his prayers and entreaties.

He awoke very early, as was his custom, but early as he was, the sun was up before him, preparing the glories of a splendid summer morning. He slipped on his clothes, threw a towel on his arm, and went downstairs. No one was as yet astir, for neither Job Endell nor his wife belonged to the class which rises with the lark. He peeped into the tap-room and bar; they were dark, and smelt unpleasantly of the fumes of beer and spirits. Unbolting the door, he slipped out into the fresh air, which was already warm with sunshine, only the sun was still low in the east.

A stroll of a quarter of a mile brought him to a little inlet of the river, where he was accustomed to take his morning bath. It was about mid-tide, and the water, though brackish, was clear and refreshing. After a plunge and a short swim he returned to land, dressed, and went for a sharp walk along the sea-wall.

Curiosity brought him again to the scene of his last night's adventure. How different it looked by daylight, bereft of the glamour cast by moon and stars! The water in the creek was low, and the banks of hard mud looked black and ugly. All around on the marshes hung folds of damp mist, melting away with the warmth of the morning sun.

He leaped down from the wall and stood on the tiny promontory where the Vision had stood on the previous night. It was covered with coarse sea-grass and loose stones, with here and there a tuft of white candywort and a flower of the dandelion. He stooped down and, Crusoe-like, saw, or fancied he saw, marks like the print of naked feet!

Then, still greatly puzzled, he walked back to the inn. By this time the landlady was up and astir. The front-door and the lower windows were wide open, and he saw Mrs. Endell moving about within, tidying the sitting-room. He sat down on the seat in front of the inn, and lit his pipe.

As he did so, his attention was attracted to a small rowing-boat, stranded on the banks of the haven—a canoe-like boat with two light paddles lying in it, and its name, the *Seamew*, painted in white letters on the stern. It was drawn up close

to the tiny dingy of the yawl, which was anchored out in the muddy bay.

‘Hullo!’ shouted a voice, and looking up he saw the head of Bufton projecting from his bedroom window.

‘Hullo, Billy! Coming down?’

Bufton nodded.

‘I say,’ continued Somerset, pointing to the rowing-boat, ‘whom does that belong to? It wasn’t here yesterday.’

‘Your Venus, perhaps,’ returned Bufton, grinning cynically and disappearing.

‘I’ll question the old man,’ muttered Somerset, rising and preparing to enter the house. He had just crossed the threshold when he heard the landlord’s voice in the bar talking eagerly to someone. He pushed the tap-room door open, and strolled in.

The window had been thrown open, the fumes of overnight had disappeared, and close to the window, looking out, stood a young girl, at whose unexpected appearance Somerset paused in amazement, his surprise being twofold—surprise at finding there a strange young person of the opposite sex, and surprise at her wonderful personal beauty.

Hair as black as night, yet shot through where the sunlight struck it with chestnut gleams; black eyebrows which nearly met over the forehead,

giving to her face in moments of passion a strangely troubled and almost sinister expression of power and intensity ; eyes large and gray, shot with agate rays ; a perfect Grecian nose, with nostrils delicately dilated ; a full ripe mouth, slightly open and disclosing ivory teeth ; and an alabaster complexion, darkly tinted on the cheeks with the sunny ruddiness of a ripe pear. Such was the girl's face and head, and the form matched them in comeliness, from the white throat to the finger-tips, and thence to the shapely feet. Her whole appearance gave an extraordinary picture of youth and strength, combined with agility and grace.

Her dress was that of a peasant girl or fisherman's daughter : a dark petticoat of blue serge, reaching to just above the ankles ; above it a white jacket or short gown of cotton, open at the throat ; coarse woollen stockings and rough leather shoes. Her black hair was gathered up in a knot, and secured by a net or snood.

As Somerset approached her, she looked at him with the utmost self-possession and the faintest shadow of a smile.

'I beg your pardon,' he murmured awkwardly. 'I—I was looking for Endell.'

As he spoke the landlord appeared behind the bar.

‘Now then, Anniedromedy,’ he said, ‘don’t stand idling there; the missis wants ye.’

‘All right,’ answered the girl, in a clear ringing voice, and with another glance at Somerset, a Parthian glance which met him full in the eyes, she passed him by and left the room.

Utterly amazed, Somerset stood for some moments looking after her; then, glancing towards the bar, he met the crafty eyes of the landlord, who was leaning over and watching him keenly.

‘Who’s that?’ asked the young man.

‘That?’ repeated Endell, with his stereotyped grin. ‘Our gel. Anniedromedy we calls her, and so she were christened.’

‘Curious name,’ murmured Somerset.

‘You’re right, sir,’ said the old man confidentially, ‘and she’s a curious gel. But she’s a spanker, for all that, ain’t she? With a wonderful pair of eyes in her figure-head, eh? But, harkee, governor,’ he continued, sinking his voice: ‘don’t let the missis catch you looking at her and admiring of her! She watches her as a cat watches a kitten, the old woman does. She won’t let even *me* be extra civil.’

‘Who is she, though? Surely not your servant?’

‘Well, no, not exactly that, though she’s got to make herself useful. She helps my missis a bit when she’s in the humour, does Anniedromedy;

but, bless ye! she's a queer little devil, and does pretty much as she pleases.'

'I didn't know she was here,' said Somerset, more and more puzzled. 'When did she come?'

'She came last night, sir, arter you was a-bed. The old woman didn't expect her, but I did.'

Somerset started. A new light flashed suddenly into his mind as he exclaimed :

'I've got it! She came in that boat which is lying on the shore in front of the inn. Am I right?'

'Sure enough, you're right,' was the reply. 'She rowed herself over from Leigh at high water, and dropped in like a ghost when me and the missis was at supper.'

Somerset's next remark—or, rather, question—was a peculiar one. Leaning eagerly across to Endell, he asked in a low voice :

'Can she—can she swim?'

The old man opened his eyes, and then, tickled by the question, burst into a hoarse chuckle.

'Now, that's the rummest question ever I heerd!' he cried.

'Answer it, for all that.'

'Oh, I'll answer it straight enough,' returned the landlord. 'Swim? Lor' bless you! she can swim like a duck, she can, and slip under water like an eel. There ain't much she can't do in that line, mister, or in the boating line, or the sailing line,

or the fishing line. She's half mermaid and half able seaman, is our gel.'

At this moment the voice of Mrs. Endell, calling 'Job! Job Endell!' in peremptory tones, summoned him away. He winked and touched his lips significantly.

'Mum's the word, sir,' he said, 'especially afore the old woman.'

The effect on Somerset of that meeting with the young girl and of Endell's mysterious hints concerning her was somewhat peculiar. Instead of hastening to pour his news into Bufton's ears, as was generally his custom, he became suddenly taciturn and uncommunicative. While they were breakfasting together in the parlour, waited on as usual by Mrs. Endell, he ate and drank like a man in a brown study, fidgeted in his chair, and once or twice began whistling a tune.

'What the devil's the matter with you?' demanded Bufton, who had been observing him for some time quietly.

'Eh? What?' answered Somerset, starting. 'Nothing's the matter. We're going to have another lovely day,' he added irrelevantly.

There was a long pause, Bufton began making his preparations for work in the open air, while Somerset sat smoking on the sill of the open window.

‘What are you going to be up to to-day?’ asked Bufton presently.

The young man did not seem to hear, and the question was repeated.

‘Perseus and Andromeda,’ murmured Somerset, as if to himself.

‘Eh? What the deuce do you mean?’

‘Nothing, Billy, only——’

He paused, and met Bufton’s astonished gaze ; then, as if suddenly tickled by the humour of the situation, he began laughing and singing the following doggerel :

‘Anniedromedy’s her name,
And England is her nation,
Canvey is her dwelling-place,
And blessed be Creation !’

‘Hang me if I can make you out!’ cried Bufton.

‘Hang me if I can make myself out!’ said Somerset, laughing. ‘It’s this way, Billy : I’m transmogrified, as I told you last night, into a jolly young Greek of the prehistoric period. This isn’t Canvey Island at all—it’s Hellas. Old Endell’s a King of the Isles, and Mother Endell’s a Sybilline oracle. As for you——’

‘Look here,’ exclaimed Bufton, strolling over to him and putting a strong hand on his shoulder, ‘either you’ve made some new discovery or you’re going off your head!’

‘Both, Billy—both,’ was the instantaneous reply. ‘I’ve made a new discovery, and I’m going off my head. So would you,’ he added emphatically, ‘if you’d seen what I have seen.’

‘Well, what have you seen, you moon-calf?’

‘First you must swear, by all the gods, to keep my secret.’

‘All right,’ said Bufton, grinning.

‘Well, then, hear and wonder. The vision that I saw last night has become a reality this morning. My Venus Anadyomene has clothed herself in modern raiment, and is here—here in the Lobster Smack. She came hither in yonder shallop, as I suspected. She arrived at hush of night, when you were snoring. I have seen her; I have spoken to her. Her name is Andromeda—or Anniedromedy in the Doric of the vulgar—and oh, Billy, I adore her to distraction!’

Whereupon he proceeded to explain in detail what had taken place—his meeting with the strange young girl, and his subsequent conversation with the landlord. Bufton listened quietly, and then observed, with a shrug of the shoulders:

‘I see—Job Endell’s “gel,” as he called her. A kitchen wench—a maid-of-all-work! Your swan turns out to be a goose, as usual.’

‘Substitute the word “duck,” and I’ll accept your description. Wait till you’ve seen her,

that's all. But mind, mine is the first call. If she sits to anyone, she sits to me.'

'Take my advice, and, whoever the girl is, let her alone,' said Bufton. 'If you don't, I shall have to warn her that you're a young fool who falls in love with every petticoat he sees. We're down here to study, not to gallivant, and, by Jove! if you don't behave yourself, I'll soon put a stop to your philandering.'

So saying, Bufton sallied forth, carrying with him his portable easel and other materials for sketching. He was soon busy at work under the shade of his umbrella. As for Somerset, he seemed at a loss what to do. He fidgeted over his sketch-book, toyed with his colours and brushes, went in and out of the room, ever with both eyes and ears alert towards the recesses of the inn where the mysterious maid was hidden. At last he joined his friend outside, and sitting down on the form in front of the inn, placed his sketch-book on his knees and began drawing.

The day advanced, and there was no sign whatever of the new-comer.

From time to time Mrs. Endell appeared at the windows or at the door, while Job was busy in the bar, waiting for customers who never came. The day was close and sultry, and a mist of mingled sunshine and vapour hung over the

marshes. Beyond the little haven, steam-boats, ships and barges passed to and fro continually on the Great River, but the sounds they brought with them only made the silence which followed the deeper and intenser.

At mid-day the two friends partook of a frugal lunch in the open air, for indoors the heat was positively unbearable. Job brought out a small wooden table, and placed it in the shadow of the inn, Mrs. Endell laid the cloth and brought out the meal—cold mutton and salad, with bread and cheese. All the time Somerset kept his eyes on the door, and made frequent excuses to run into the house and up to his bedroom. Still there was no sign of Andromeda.

‘This is beastly!’ he muttered, scowling at his companion. ‘Where, oh where is my Divinity?’

Buften grinned mockingly.

‘Your Divinity is a female of the name of Harris,’ he said, alluding to a well-known creation of the immortal ‘Boz.’ ‘I don’t believe there’s no sich person.’

His back was towards the door of the inn, which Somerset sat facing. Suddenly he saw the young man’s face change and brighten.

‘Don’t you? Look there!’

Turning quickly on his seat, Buften saw at the inn door the very individual whose existence he

had been doubting. She was standing on the threshold, shading her eyes with her hands and gazing across the haven in the direction of the river. She was apparently quite unconscious of, or indifferent to, the presence of the two men.

Somerset, however, saw his opportunity. Holding up a tankard which he had just emptied, he knocked vigorously on the table with the handle of his knife. The girl turned, nodded, and came towards him.

‘Yes, sir?’ she said quietly.

‘I was summoning Mrs. Endell,’ he replied, looking up into her face with a self-assured smile. ‘The fact is, I should like another half-pint of ale.’

The girl nodded again, took the tankard, and ran into the house. The eyes of the two men met.

‘Well?’ exclaimed Somerset triumphantly.

‘Is that the girl?’ said Bufton.

‘That, sir,’ replied Somerset, with assumed pomposity, ‘is the individual whom you have coarsely designated Mrs. Harris! Tell me honestly what you think of her. If you are any judge whatever, which I doubt, of the female form divine——’

‘Shut up!’ growled the other, as the girl reappeared, carrying in her hand the replenished

tankard, which she placed down before Somerset. The young man seized the tankard, and, bowing smilingly to the girl, raised it to his lips, still with his eyes fixed on hers. With perfect self-possession she returned his gaze, glanced quietly at Bufton, and then, turning carelessly away, walked down to the shore, and began examining the rowing-boat, which was drawn up high above water-mark.

‘“Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine!”’ murmured Somerset, with a wink. ‘Your health, Anniedromedy.’

He had sunk his voice to a whisper, so that it was impossible she could have heard him, but as he pledged her, she looked towards him with an amused smile. He waved the tankard towards her, and she turned laughingly away.

‘Isn’t she splendid?’ said Somerset.

‘She’s not bad,’ replied Bufton. ‘Mind what I said to you. She’s a good little girl, I’m sure, and you’ve got to let her alone. If you don’t——’

He was interrupted by Mrs. Endell, who now came from the inn bearing some fruit—apples and oranges—on a willow-pattern plate. As she placed them down on the table she glanced towards the girl with an expression the reverse of amiable, and then at Somerset, who sat smiling into her face.

‘Shall I get you some more ale, mister?’ she asked, frowning.

‘Thank you,’ replied Somerset ; ‘ the young lady has already done me that honour.’

‘Chaffing, as usual,’ muttered the old woman. ‘There’s no young ladies here, mister. If you mean the lass yonder, she’s no call to wait upon you—that’s my business. You let her alone, and she’ll let you alone ; that’s my advice to *you*.’

‘Come, come, mother, don’t lose your temper,’ cried Somerset, still with his provoking smile.

‘I ain’t losing my temper neither!’ returned Mrs. Endell. ‘But it’s no use talking to you, mister ; you’re too full of your imperence.’ She turned to Bufton and addressed herself to him. ‘You see, sir, she’s under my care, and I’ve got to look arter her.’

‘A relation, I suppose?’ asked the elder man.

‘Well, not ’xactly a relation ; but I knows her people and she’s under my charge, so I’ll take it as a favour, sir, if you’ll remember that. She’s no call to be hereaways at all just now. I was hoping she’d stay at Rayleigh till you and your friend had gone.’

So saying, with another grim look at Somerset, whose sentiments towards young persons of her own sex she evidently distrusted, she sailed back

to the inn. On the threshold she paused and called out : ‘ Anniedromedy !’

The girl looked up from the boat over which she had been bending. Mrs. Endell pointed into the house, as if to imply that the girl was wanted there, and disappeared across the threshold.

‘ You heard what the old lady said ?’ observed Bufton. ‘ She has evidently the most perfect comprehension of your rascally character. If you don’t mind, you may get both the girl and yourself into trouble.’

‘ Rubbish !’ cried Somerset, springing up and looking eagerly towards the subject of their conversation. ‘ There is a mystery, and I’m going to solve it. By Jove ! she’s launching the boat. I suppose she’s going out for a row.’

Such seemed to be the case. The girl, putting out all her strength, was endeavouring to push the boat into the water ; but although the boat was very light, the shore was muddy, and the task was no easy one. In a minute Somerset had joined her, despite the remonstrances of his friend, who tried to call him back.

‘ Let me help you,’ he cried eagerly.

She smiled and nodded, and with his assistance the boat was soon floated. Indifferent both to mud and water, Somerset stood holding the boat, while the girl leaped in, seated herself, and seized

a paddle to push off. But the young man still clung to the boat, though he felt himself sinking ankle-deep in the muddy tide.

‘Take care, sir!’ cried the girl; ‘you’ll get yourself wet.’

‘Oh, never mind,’ was the desperate reply. ‘May I ask where you are going?’

The girl laughed and waved her hand towards the river.

‘I suppose I mustn’t come with you?’ said Somerset.

She looked at him, with a little shrug of the shoulders, her dark eyebrows contracting, her eyes inspecting him curiously. Then she shook her head, with a glance towards the inn.

‘At least, you’ll do me a favour? That’s our yawl floating there at anchor. I want to get on board, and——’

‘All right; jump in,’ answered the girl carelessly.

In a moment he had sprung into the boat, almost upsetting it in his eagerness, and had sunk down in the stern, while the girl seized the paddles and rowed from the shore. The yawl was only a hundred yards away, and they approached it rapidly.

‘You needn’t row so fast,’ cried Somerset, smiling. ‘I’m not in a hurry.’

The hint was entirely thrown away, and before any further remonstrance could be made they were alongside the yawl.

Somerset did not stir.

‘It seems a shame to leave you,’ he said.
‘Shall we change places, and——’

Another emphatic shake of the head, and another glance towards the inn, close to which Bufton was standing in company with Mrs. Endell.

‘Would you mind telling me your name?’ said Somerset.

‘Annie,’ answered the girl.

‘Anniedromedy?’

The black eyebrows were again contracted, and the eyes flashed almost angrily.

‘Just Annie,’ answered the girl, with evident impatience, motioning him to step on board. Thus urged, he clambered on to the yacht, and swift as an arrow the little boat shot away towards the river. He took off his hat and waved it to his new acquaintance. She looked back and nodded. The frown had faded from her face, and her eyes twinkled merrily.

‘Annie—not Anniedromedy,’ muttered Somerset. ‘She’s Andromeda to me for all that, and if there’s any Dragon to be polished off, I’m on to play Perseus.’

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAID OF CANVEY ISLAND.

LEAVING Somerset to gaze after her admiringly from the deck of the little yawl, the girl rowed rapidly across the pool or basin in the direction of the river.

The tide was running out, and the boat needed little or no propelling as soon as it was caught in the current. In a few minutes it swept through the narrow passage communicating with the Thames, while the girl, only leaning on her oars, just touched the water with the blades from time to time to keep the little craft steady. The sun was blazing down on the great river. Vessels of all kinds were coming and going—barges drifting down with the tide, brown-sailed fishing-boats creeping far away along the Kentish shore, homeward-bound vessels crawling slowly in the wake of fussy little tugs. The water was low, and

along the shores of Canvey Island stretched banks of sand and mud, crowned here and there with red iron beacons, and haunted by flocks of screaming gulls. Out towards the middle of the stream large buoys marked the deep channel.

Keeping near to the shore in the shallows, Annie suffered herself to be drifted slowly along in the slack ebb until she reached the grass-covered promontory, at the end of which stood a beacon, a sort of iron cage, the favourite resting-place of black-backed gulls and kittiwakes. Here she paused, and, running the boat on a dry spot, half mud, half shingle, drew it well out of the water and secured it to the shore by throwing out the anchor. A minute later she stood under the beacon, shading her eyes with her hands, and gazing out towards the distant Nore.

Beyond Canvey Island the Thames spread out into a broad estuary, mingling its waters with those of the distant sea. To the left—that is to say, to the north-east—lay the cliffs and low headlands of Essex, with the red-tiled fishing village of Leigh, facing muddy flats and deep pools sprinkled with shrimping boats, some floating at anchor, others stranded on the mud ; to the right, dimly visible through the twinkling banks of heat, were the hills of Kent and the mouth of the river, with the naval station of Sheerness ; further away to

the south were the island of Sheppey and the little low-lying town of Herne Bay ; while due eastward, right before her eyes, was the great estuary itself, covered with vessels of all sizes and degrees, and rippling with a breeze blowing fresh from the English Channel.

It was a beautiful scene, full of life and motion, yet very still and silent, like a picture seen in a mirror. No sound disturbed the air, save now and then the cry of a sea-gull or the sharp whistle of a passing curlew.

Quietly and earnestly, like one seeking for some sign or expecting some message, the girl watched the great waters, glancing from shore to shore, from ship to ship, and as she gazed her face grew troubled, angry even, and her black eyebrows were knitted ominously over her eager eyes. Then, with an impatient gesture of the arms and a shrug of the shoulders, she threw herself down on the thin grass at the foot of the beacon, and, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, gazed sullenly at vacancy. Her face grew darker and angrier. From time to time she sighed heavily, as if in pain, and as her eyes fell again on the dark waters and the dreary flats of the island surrounding her, they grew dim with unshed tears.

It was late in the afternoon when she reappeared

at the inn. The two artists had wandered off together for a stroll about the island, the inn-keeper was in the bar attending to two or three stray customers who had landed from a barge, and his wife was alone in the kitchen. The girl came in slowly and wearily, and, without a word, threw herself down on a stool by the kitchen fire. Seated there, she rested her chin in her hand, and gazed at vacancy, with the same dull expression she had worn out of doors. The old woman watched her quietly, and then, breaking the oppressive silence, said sharply :

‘Where have you been, Anniedromedy? I’ve been waiting for you all day to help me to tidy up.’ Then, as the girl returned no answer, she continued : ‘It’s about time, ain’t it, you made yourself a bit more useful? Young gels like you wasn’t born to idle and waste their time away, and I’m sick and tired of your goings on this year past.’

‘You ain’t more sick and tired than I am,’ cried the girl, with a flash of her dark eyes. ‘I hate the place—I hate myself! I’d sooner drown myself than live on here like this.’

‘Now don’t you be a fool,’ returned Mrs. Endell, a little cowed by the angry rejoinder. ‘Don’t you forget, neither, which side your bread’s buttered, miss. We promised to keep you till he come

back, and we've done it, and see as no harm came to you ; but you owe us mor'n two years' board and lodging, and the Lord knows whether we'll ever be paid. Joe thinks never ; and look you, we're poor folk and can't afford to keep a fine lady about the house.'

'A pretty lady!' cried the girl, with a bitter laugh ; but she added, rising to her feet and still looking down at the fire : 'You needn't be frightened, though ; I shan't stop here much longer.'

'Now look 'ee here, Anniedromedy.'

The girl wheeled round fiercely as if stung.

'*Don't* call me that !' she cried.

'It's your name, ain't it ?' asked the old woman.

'I don't know and I don't care ; but I hate it, and I won't be called by it. Call me Annie, if you like, but not the other. It makes me sick—it makes me remember ! It makes me——'

She paused suddenly, shuddering and hugging herself with her arms as if chilled. Her face had grown quite gray and colourless.

'Come, come !' said Mrs. Endell, more gently, walking to her and placing a hand upon her arm. , Don't be contrary, my gel. You know you've got a friend in me as long as you behave respectable and do what's told you. Just you be patient and bide a bit. P'raps things will right them-

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selves before long ; p'raps he'll come back, and then——'

Darker and darker grew the girl's face.

'He'll never come back,' she said, 'and I'm glad of it.'

'Don't say that, my lass ; he's the best friend you ever had.'

'Friend or no friend,' was the answer, 'he's gone for evermore. If he was living, he'd have been home long ere this. It's four long years now, mother, since he went away, saying he'd be back in a year. I've waited long enough, and now I'm tired of waiting ; so I'm going away, first chance I get, to seek my fortune.'

The old woman smiled pityingly, and shook her head.

'No, no,' she cried, 'you ain't going away yet awhile. Time enough for that when I bid you pack, and it ain't come to that yet, if you behave yourself and make yourself useful. Don't you forget that I've promised to look after you and keep you out of trouble. Fortune, indeed ! Gels don't make their fortunes so easy, and even if they did, you ain't free to do as you please.'

'I am free!' cried Annie. 'You can't keep me if I want to go !'

'I can, though,' replied Mrs. Endell, 'and the law will uphold me. You're left under my care

till the man that owns you comes back to claim you!' She added more gently, seeing that the girl was about to retort passionately: 'Come, lass, don't be foolish. You know well enough you've got a good home here, and have always been used kindly. I've held my tongue, and so has Job, about you. Folk think you're a free, unbespoken gel, and neither wife nor widdy, though the Lord knows you're one of them two, and maybe both. If they knew what we know, they'd be talking, and we don't want that.'

Her voice sank to a whisper as she spoke, and when the girl answered her it was also in hushed tones, almost of entreaty. For some time they conversed thus together, and presently the girl grew quieter and more resigned, until at last, quite subdued to the other's will, she began to assist her in the housework.

Later on in the day, while Somerset and Bufton were still absent, Annie entered the rooms upstairs. The bedroom occupied by Bufton resembled its owner, in its carelessly arranged and untidy character; clothes, books, and artistic materials were scattered about everywhere, and pipes and cigar-boxes covered the mantelpiece. Quite different was the room adjoining, where Somerset slumbered nightly. The contents of an elegant dressing-bag were arranged before the mirror—

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ivory-backed brushes, with the monogram 'C. S.,' bottles of scent, packets of perfumed soap. Everything was daintily and neatly arranged, for Somerset was an elegant and a luxurious young gentleman. On a small table near the window were some books, tastefully bound, and among them, in a double frame of yellow plush, two photographs—one of Somerset himself in boating flannels, the other of a young lady.

Full of feminine curiosity, Annie examined the photographs very carefully. That of Somerset was a capital likeness, with the happy, open face and bold eyes of the original. While she looked at it it seemed to smile at her roguishly, as the man himself had done, and in answer to the smile her own eyes sparkled and her face flushed eagerly. Then she turned to the other picture, and her expression grew less amiable. The young lady was certainly very pretty—a blonde, with blue eyes and golden hair.

She was wondering to herself who the young lady could be—the young man's sister or his sweetheart—when she heard voices below, and then someone running lightly up the stairs. She had just time to put down the photograph frame and to reach the door, when she found herself face to face with the tenant of the room. He drew aside, smiling, to let her pass, which she did,

with her face burning, her eyes averted. He laughed. She did not turn. Then he called to her in his clear, boyish voice, and she turned and looked him in the face.

‘Would you mind asking Mrs. Endell,’ he said, ‘to send me up some warm water?’

She nodded, and turned to go.

‘Stop a bit,’ he continued, laughing. ‘You needn’t be in such a hurry.’ Then, as she hesitated, he continued: ‘It was rather a shame of you to leave me perched out yonder on the yawl. I thought you would have come back to fetch me and take me ashore. As it was, I had to wait there till I was relieved by a sweep of a bargee.’

There was something so frank and so good-humoured in his nature that it was impossible to be angry with him for his impudence, or to refrain from answering his smile. Their eyes met, and Annie vanished, carrying the message to the kitchen. The old woman received it with an angry toss of the head.

‘Sit ye down there,’ she said. ‘I’ll take Mr. Somerset his hot water.’

Annie smiled and shrugged her shoulders. Her fit of gloom seemed to have quite passed away. She had heard the first note of the charmer, and was quite in the mood to wait and listen for more.

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Several days passed, during which the young man saw little or nothing of his new acquaintance. When they did meet, Mrs. Endell was always close at hand, jealously watching her charge, and spiriting her away at the slightest overtures at conversation. Somerset, however, being a past master in this sort of business, was only biding his time. He was determined to know more of Annie—or ‘Anniedromedy,’ as they called her—and he was not easily beaten or daunted. The chance he was waiting for came at last, early one morning, about a week after their first meeting.

He had wandered away to take his early plunge, and was turning back to the inn for breakfast, when he saw the girl in the distance, her face turned inland in the direction of Benfleet. She was strolling slowly and carelessly along, carrying on her arm a small basket, and the road she followed wound right across the island, to a farm which was situated a couple of miles away, near to the Benfleet Woods.

Without a moment’s hesitation Somerset gave chase, just keeping his quarry in sight till the inn was hidden behind the sea-wall, and there was no likelihood of espionage in that direction. Then he spurted, and, being a swift pedestrian, soon overtook the girl. She heard his footsteps behind

her, looked back, saw him approaching, and walked quickly away.

In another minute he was close to her, raising his hat politely, and giving her 'Good-morning.' With head averted, she returned his greeting, and he noticed, with the keen eye of a sportsman, that her white neck was suffused with crimson, a sign that she was blushing nervously, or, as it might be, flushing indignantly.

'May I ask where you are going?' he inquired, keeping pace with her as she hurried on.

She answered that she was going on an errand to the farm.

'May I accompany you?' he asked, with his most insinuating smile.

She turned, and looked him full in the face. The blush, if blush it had been, was gone, and her gaze was quite calm and self-possessed.

'I'd rather you didn't,' she said, with decision.

'I'd rather I did,' he returned, not in the least abashed. 'You see,' he continued easily, 'I've been longing to have a talk with you ever since we first met. It's so awfully dull down here with no one to talk to, and I was thinking of packing up my traps and returning to London, when you appeared, like a bit of new sunshine.'

She did not reply, but her pace slackened and

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her face grew thoughtful, as they strolled on side by side.

‘Do you come from London, sir?’ she asked presently.

‘Indeed I do,’ was the reply—‘from the part of it they call Bohemia. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?’

‘No,’ she answered, with a shake of the head. ‘I’ve only been in London once, and that was years since, when I was little. I’ve often thought I’d like to live there.’

‘I don’t think you’d like it,’ said Somerset. ‘To a country girl like you——’

To his surprise she interrupted him impatiently, saying :

‘I ain’t a country girl ; I hate the country ! I hate Canvey Island most of all ! It’s right enough, perhaps, in summer-time, but in winter, when the fogs come, and the sun scarcely shines, and there’s nothing to look at but the black marshes and the river, and the rainy sea out yonder, it’s like being dead and buried.’

‘Have you lived here all your life?’

‘Not much!’ cried Annie, with a toss of the head. ‘I came here four years ago, and I’ve never left it, except to stop now and then with the young ladies at Rayleigh.’

‘And before you came here?’

Her face darkened, her black eyebrows were contracted, while the old look of desolation came into her face. She made no answer.

‘If you were not born in the country,’ he persisted, ‘where were you born? Not in London, surely?’

‘You want to know too much,’ she said, turning her face away, and speaking to him over her shoulder.

‘I am rather inquisitive,’ he returned cheerily. ‘You see, you interest me. Such a pretty girl as you——’

Her eyes flashed at him, as she exclaimed:

‘Now you’re chaffing! I’m not fool enough to think I’m pretty—and even if I was, it wouldn’t matter.’

‘Beauty always matters, and I can assure you, speaking purely as an artist, that I’m neither chaffing nor flattering. You’re as handsome as your namesake must have been, I assure you!’

‘My namesake? Who’s she?’

‘Why, Andromeda—the Greek maiden who was rescued by Perseus from the Monster. The name is rather an unusual one, and I should like to know how you got it.’

‘My name’s Annie!’ returned the girl emphatically; ‘I hate the other!’

‘Why?’

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‘Because!’ was the irrelevant reply, emphasized by compressed lips and flashing eyes.

They wandered on side by side. Presently Annie paused, glancing back in the direction of the inn.

‘I think you’d best go,’ she said. ‘Your breakfast’s waiting, sir.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ he replied; ‘and if you don’t mind, I’d rather keep you company.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind,’ said Annie, with a little shrug of the shoulders. ‘But if they see you and me walking together, they’ll be scolding. Mrs. Endell doesn’t like me to talk to gentlemen.’

‘Whom does she expect you to talk to?’ demanded Somerset, laughing. ‘Only to water-side characters and bargees? Besides, what right has she to shut you out from civilized society and polite conversation like mine? That’s the worst of these superannuated country folk! They think a man can’t look at a young person of the other sex without making love to her.’

Their eyes met, and the girl laughed.

‘Some men can’t,’ she said—‘or, at least, pretending.’

‘I’m different.’

‘I’m sure I hope so, sir,’ she returned simply. ‘Love-making’s all nonsense. Folk can be friendly without that, and I’m sure it’s a pleasure

to talk now and then to someone who looks like a Christian.'

With talk like this they beguiled the way, and presently came within sight of the farm for which Annie was bound—a small, low-lying cluster of buildings situated in the centre of marshy fields, on which forlorn cattle were amphibiously grazing. Annie's restraint and embarrassment had vanished, and she talked quite freely about herself and her solitary life, only darkening and resuming something of her former gloomy manner when Somerset questioned her about her birth and antecedents.

Close to the farm they parted, the girl refusing to accept his escort any further. More puzzled than ever about his new acquaintance, Somerset strolled back to the Lobster Smack for breakfast.

CHAPTER V.

THOUGH CONVERSATIONAL, IS RETROSPECTIVE.

NATURALLY of an inquiring mind, and being peculiarly interested in the person whom he had encountered under such romantic circumstances, Somerset determined to go to the fountain-head for information. That fountain-head was Job Endell, and the way to make it flow freely was to pour ardent spirits into it. So that very day Somerset beguiled the old sea-dog on board the little yawl, took him down to the tiny cabin, where there was a supply of excellent whisky, and when, under the influence of several drams, Job was beginning to grow talkative, prepared for his cross-examination.

‘You don’t keep stuff like that ashore, Job,’ he said, refilling Job’s glass from a fast-ebbing bottle.

Job grinned and shook his head.

‘We’ve no call for it, mister,’ he replied. ‘The customers who come our way ain’t of much account, and don’t know good drink from bad. It’s a poor place, Canvey Island, a rotten poor place, and if it wasn’t for stray gentry like you and Mister Bufton, ’twouldn’t hardly be worth my while to keep the place going. Lord! when I think of the times I’ve had, and the things I’ve seen, afore I settled down in this ’ere wilderness, I feel inclined to curse and swear.’

‘I don’t wonder.’

‘Why, just look round you, sir. What is there to see, year’s end to year’s end? Only mud and sand and brackish water, the marshes this side, the river that side, and the ships a-going past like ghosts, outward and homeward bound—shut up with the old woman like a toad-in-the-hole, and me still hale and hearty, as fond of a bit of fun as ever.’

‘No doubt it’s dismal enough,’ said Somerset, lighting a cigar. ‘If you find it so, what must that young girl think who lives with you and the mistress!’

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well, you see, she’s only a gel, and gels is different,’ he remarked; then with a wink of the eye, and a crafty look, he added: ‘I see you’ve taken notice on her, Mr. Somerset.’

‘Of course I have,’ said Somerset, smiling.
‘Petticoats are scarce hereabouts, you see.’

Job leaned forward with his hands on his knees, and grinned significantly.

‘You’d better not let the old woman see you looking at her! She looks arter her wonderful sharp, does the old woman, and so does I for that matter, for a bargain’s a bargain. You see, sir, *Anniedromedy*’s under our care, and we’ve got to see no harm comes to her.’

‘A relation, I suppose?’

‘Well, she’s a sort of a kind of a relation of the missis’s, not of mine.’

‘Lived with you long?’

‘Four or five years, on and off,’ answered Job dryly. ‘If you’ll promise to keep it dark, I don’t mind telling you a secret. Well, it’s this way. *Anniedromedy*’s a sort of a orphan—without father or mother; what’s more, no one knows, and no one ever will know, what stock she sprung from. She was born out there at sea, and they christened her arter the ship on which she was found. *Anniedromedy* was the ship’s name, and *Anniedromedy*’s hers, though we calls her Annie for short, as you’re aweer.’

‘What you tell me is awfully interesting,’ said Somerset, disguising his eager curiosity under a careless languor. ‘Fill up your glass.’

‘No, no ; I’ve had enough, mister,’ returned Endell, chuckling.

‘Nonsense ! A seasoned old salt like you ! Why, there isn’t a headache in a whole hogshead of this whisky !’

‘Well, just another thimbleful, and then I must get ashore. You was asking about Annie-dromedy, and wondering no doubt how she came to Canvey Island. Well, I’ll tell ye ; but mind, not a word of this to the old woman.’

‘Of course not.’

‘Nigh on twenty years ago, when I was still going afloat, and the missus was keeping a lodging-house for sailors over there in Gravesend, a relation of hers, sort of a second cousin, one Matt Watson, come home arter a long woyage. He’d been to South Ameriky, and round the Horn, and then, coming back, had been shipwrecked on the shores of Patagonia. He was only a lad then, was Matt, but a born devil as ever you see, fearing nothink under the sun, as black as a Cuban, and as ready as any furreigner for to draw a knife.’

‘Well ?’

‘Well, sir, this ’ere Matt Watson had a sister—a single woman, living along shore at Northfleet, and this sister o’ course was a pal of my missus’s. One morning, just arter Matt come back, the missus goes over to make a call, and she finds

Matt's sister—Liza was her name, Liza Watson—a-sitting by the fire and nussing a kid—a little black-eyed babby about a year old. "Lord save us!" said the missus. "Who's kid's that? not yourn?" Liza laughed. "No, it ain't mine," she says; "it's Matt's." "Then," says my missus, "you don't mean to tell me as Matt is married!" Liza, she laughed again. "No, he ain't married," she said; "but all the same, this is Matt's kid, and I'm a-goin' to keep it for him!" Now, I needn't tell you, sir, for you knows my old woman, that she was allus werry particular! She bridles up and cries out that Matt ought to be ashamed of hisself, and at that moment in comes Matt hisself, grinning like a monkey.'

'Go on,' said Somerset, 'I begin to understand. The child was——'

'Jest you give me time,' said Endell, with a tipsy chuckle. 'In comes Matt, swaggering, his eyes like coals, his black hair tumbling over his head, his sailor's knife in his belt; and when the missus turned on him and began abusing of him, he laughed and smacked her on the shoulder. Then it come out that the young devil had sailed back on a ship loaded with cattle from South Ameriky and carrying a few steerage passengers homeward bound; and among them passengers was a young woman who shipped at Buenos Ayres, who was

dreadful bad with some sort of a fever, and who died one night, giving birth to that kid. No one knowed who she was, except that her name was entered in the ship's books as Mary Costello, nor where she come from, or where she was going, and she'd only a bundle with her with a few clothes and no money; and when they sewed her up in her canvas shroud and dropped her over the vessel's side, there was a hend of her. But the puzzle was what to do with the babe she'd left behind her.'

'A little girl?'

'Right you are—a little gel; and, to cut a long story short, that little gel was Anniedromedy.'

'I guessed as much.'

'They was a rough lot aboard that ship, but they had the little un christened, and the name they give her was the name of the ship as she was born on, the *Anniedromedy*. Another poor woman nussed her and looked arter her till they come to Plymouth, and landed the cargo and passengers and paid off the crew. Then the puzzle was what to do with the little un. She'd no home, and no friends, and no belongings, d'ye see—and Lord knows what would ha' become on her if that wild devil Matt Watson hadn't up and volunteered to take her and adopt her, and give her to his sister to be brung up by hand.'

‘He did that!’ exclaimed Somerset. ‘He must have been a good fellow!’

‘Good in his ’art, sir, good in his ’art,’ murmured the old man patronizingly. ‘Allus free with his pay, and kindly to women-folk, though a savage chap when he lost his temper among men. Now, you’ll never guess what first drewed him to the little kid, and made him take the fancy to bring her up. It was this, Mister Somerset. Arter the poor mother was put overboard, and they was looking at the lettles gel, one of the women larfs and says, “Why, she’s the very moral of yourself, mate, an’ you might ha’ been her daddy!” And sure enough ’twas so; for she’d black eyes like his, and blacker eyebrows, and she was dark and wild-looking as a little imp o’ the sea. Well, somehow that pleased Matt, and he took to the kid from that minute forrard, and from that day to this he’s been her best friend.’

The old man rose a little unsteadily, and, muttering something to himself about the ‘old woman,’ made his way on deck. Somerset followed, his curiosity only whetted by what he had heard. The tide was out, and the little yawl had taken the ground, so that it was just possible to scramble over her side and walk ashore across the mud.

‘Finish your story, Job,’ said Somerset, as they

stood on deck. 'What became of the child afterwards?'

'Why, she grew, and she grew,' answered the old man, 'till she come to be what you now see her. Liza Watson reared her, and Matt he paid the piper, coming and going from his work at sea. Then, close on five year ago, when Anniedromedy was a dark slip of a gel, Liza died sudden, and Matt, he come ashore arter a long voyage the werry day o' the burying, and finds Anniedromedy a-crying in the empty lodging. Just about that time I'd invested my savings in the Lobster Smack, and one day, as I was a-sitting at the door smoking my pipe, up comes Matt Watson, and the gel follering him, looking full o' trouble. He nods to me, and he goes in and talks to the missus. They was a long time talking together, and when I went in to look arter them, I found 'twas all settled that Anniedromedy was to stay under my old woman's care, while Matt went back to sea.'

'Then you were not consulted?'

'Oh yes, I was,' answered Endell, with a wink, 'when it come to business. We couldn't afford to board and lodge a stranger for nothing, and I settled the terms, money down. But, mind you, Matt didn't go afloat again for nearly a year arter that, and afore he sailed away there was rum doings down here and up in Gravesend. Don't

ax me any more, though, for I ain't a-going to tell you. All the rest consarns only Annie-dromedy, myself, and my old woman.'

He was scrambling over the yacht's side when Somerset detained him by placing his hand on his shoulder.

'Only one question, Job. Where's that sailor fellow now?'

Endell looked up with a doleful shake of the head.

'That's the puzzle, mister,' he replied. 'It's over four years since he went away on his last woyage, and since that time we've heard no word on him. I doubt he's dead and drowned, though the missus she allus holds he'll come back. I wish he would, and pay me what he owes me. Meantime, you see, here's the gel on our hands, and Lord knows what we're to do with her, seeing she's neither kith nor kin of ours.'

Away he floundered across the mud, leaving Somerset thoroughly puzzled and amazed.

The young man had tapped the fountain indeed, and discovered nearly everything he desired to know. When all was told, however, Annie herself remained as great a mystery as ever. The child of an unknown woman, born miserably on shipboard, christened unconventionally on the deep sea, adopted by a savage sailor-lad, brought home

to England like a monkey or a parrot, to be reared in a lodging alongshore, and then finally left, a maiden all forlorn, on Canvey Island. It was a strange tale, rendered still stranger and more wonderful by the singular beauty of the girl.

The reader has doubtless gathered by this time that Somerset was a highly volatile young gentleman, prone to follow his own amusement with a somewhat reckless disregard of consequences. In following and opening up an acquaintance with the young girl of the inn, his idea was merely to pass the time, and to enjoy a little innocent flirtation. It never occurred to him that the consequences might be serious; for, to do him justice, he was not vain enough to fancy himself a lady-killer, or a man capable of awakening a grand passion.

Nor was he, with all his frivolity, addicted to coarse and degrading amours. He was simply a good-looking and somewhat feather-brained young fellow, who took life lightly, and knew little or nothing of its stormier emotions; romantic, of course, in an easy-hearted way, but very little inclined to lose his heart irretrievably. In fact, if the truth must be told, his matrimonial arrangements had been already made for him in connection with a near branch of his own family, and he had no intention whatever, at the time of which

we are writing, of disturbing those arrangements in any way.

Nevertheless, little as he suspected the danger, he was playing with fire. He happened to come into the girl's life at the very moment when she was most eager and willing to give such a visitor welcome, and whatever he might be, she was made of perilous stuff, to its inmost essence combustible.

Like most young girls brought up in solitude, she had been dreaming for many a day of a Fairy Prince, young, ardent, adorable, who would awaken her with a kiss, and lead her away into the world of happy fable.

The moment she first saw Somerset her heart leaped up to give him greeting, for nothing quite so sunny had hitherto crossed her path. His bold advances to her completed the conquest. Her passionate nature, long in revolt against its surroundings, began to stir and quicken within her. Time alone could decide whether the event for which she had longed was to be fatal to her or beneficent. All she yet realized was that the wonder-working moment had arrived.

CHAPTER VI.

IS ALSO RETROSPECTIVE.

THERE was in the life of Andromeda a secret which has yet to be told, but which must be reserved for full narration later on. For one reason and another, it was carefully kept by the old couple with whom she dwelt, even Job Endell, garrulous and loose-tongued as he was, drawing a careful veil over one portion of her romantic story.

For the rest, what the old man had told to Somerset, under the soothing influence of his favourite cordial, was true in the main. The girl, when an infant, had been brought home from sea by a wild young sailor, and confided to the care of his sister ; afterwards, on the sister's death, to be passed over into the keeping of Endell and his wife, who undertook, for a substantial consideration, to look after her while her sailor guardian was away afloat. Money had been paid liberally

to them in advance, for Matt Watson was open-handed, in the manner of his class, and, having no blood relation of his own to drain his substance, was both eager and willing to pay for the support of the little foundling.

But four years had passed, and he had not returned ; the money he had left was long exhausted, and the presumption appeared to be that he had died at sea or at some foreign port, whither he had sailed as able seaman.

At the time of his departure, Annie, as we shall henceforth call her, was just sixteen, slight, and thin, and showing few traces of that singular beauty to which she had attained on her first meeting with Somerset. Black-eyed, tawny-skinned, quick of temper, she still bore a strange likeness to the man who had elected to maintain her.

Her senior by many years, the man had always exhibited towards her a strange and ever-growing affection. Though he saw her seldom, being constantly away on voyages more or less protracted, he had never returned home without bringing manifold gifts and tokens picked up abroad—silk stuffs from India and China, quaint barbaric trinkets, strange birds, and other such presents as sailors bring home to their friends and sweet-hearts. His visits were naturally associated in

the child's mind with all sorts of pleasure, and she grew to regard the wild and kindly visitor as a kind of foster-father, to whose devotion and kindness she might always look forward. Often, however, she was terrified by his savage ways and fits of violent passion. He drank deeply when ashore, and when in liquor was about as amiable as a wild beast.

A few months before Annie attained her sixteenth year, Matt Watson returned from the far East just in time to follow his sister to the grave. He found the girl plunged in genuine grief, for Liza had been kind, though somewhat coarse and domineering, and her care for the child had been that of a rough foster-mother. At a loss what to do, he had consulted Mrs. Endell, and had finally arranged that she should shelter Annie for the time being.

His sister dead and buried, and Annie consigned to Mrs. Endell's care, Matt Watson remained for several months on shore, dividing his time in sailor fashion between Gravesend and the Lobster Smack. He had saved a good sum of ready money, the bulk of which he placed in Mrs. Endell's hands for Annie's maintenance, reserving the residue to spend among the rough companions he encountered in his favourite haunts.

He was now over thirty years of age, or nearly

fifteen years Annie's senior—a short, strongly-built man, with muscular chest, long, powerful arms, and somewhat stunted lower limbs. With his swarthy, weather-beaten face, long black ringlets, rough black beard and moustache, black, deep-set eyes, he looked more foreign than English, and his strange and somewhat sinister appearance was emphasized by the tattoo-marks on his sinewy hands and arms and hairy breast, and by large golden rings suspended to his ears. His voice was gruff and deep, his gestures violent, his manner reckless and domineering.

Rough and aggressive towards others, to Annie he was gentle and even shy. He would sit and gaze at her with a sense of kindly ownership, his grim features softened, his white teeth gleaming in a smile. 'My gel,' he called her. He spoke little, but now and then, when he had been drinking, he would draw her to him and fondle her approvingly. Gradually, through some natural instinct, she began to avoid his caresses. His coarse affection repulsed her and filled her with a secret dread.

The dread increased when Mrs. Endell began to throw out hints that she might some day marry her benefactor; that, indeed, marriage ought to be the best solution of the difficulty which made her, with no blood-claim upon him,

a burden on his hands. Although as yet too young and simple-minded to realize what marriage meant, the girl shrank terrified from the prospect of a closer personal relationship with one who repelled her so completely on the physical side.

The time at last came when it was necessary for the man to return again on shipboard. He had been offered the berth of mate on a large sailing-vessel, bound for the Fiji Islands and thence to the western shores of South America, and he was certain to be absent at least eighteen months, and possibly longer.

The date of his departure once fixed, he became unusually morose and taciturn. Day after day he came to the Lobster Smack, and would sit silent in the kitchen for hours, gazing at Annie. Sometimes he was closeted with Mrs. Endell, for the purpose of mysterious conversation. At last the cause of his curious conduct was made manifest. One morning, to Annie's amazement, Mrs. Endell informed her that Matt Watson desired, before departing, to go through the ceremony of marriage with the orphan girl.

At first all Annie's nature rose in revolt against the proposition. Marry Matt Watson! Marry the man who, although no blood relation, had been all her life a foster-father to her! She shrank in shame and terror at the very idea.

Gradually, however, as the old woman talked to her, she listened more attentively. After all, Mrs. Endell argued, the ceremony would be only a matter of form, and seeing that she owed everything to the free-handed sailor, it was right that she should humour him in his wish to make her his wife. What other prospect had she in the world? Without friends or money, how could she hope to make her way in the world? And how, moreover, could she expect the man to continue to support her if she had no lawful claim upon his kindness?

‘You see, deary,’ said the old woman, ‘it’s the poor chap’s fancy to make sure of you before he goes away to sea. If you’re married to him afore he goes, he’ll know there’s a little wife awaiting him when he comes back ; and after all he’s done for you, after the years and years he’s been your only friend, it ain’t much to ask by way of payment. He’s a good sort, is Matt. He’s proved that, ain’t he? So just you take my advice and do what he asks you, and I don’t think you’ll ever regret it, my gel.’

What could the child say? She could not deny to herself that she owed everything in the world to her benefactor, and though she shrank from him as a possible husband, he had proved himself almost her only friend. She yielded the more

easily because the man, with curious and awkward timidity, forbore to press his own suit, while appearing to plead silently for the wished-for proof of her grateful affection. Had he pursued her roughly and aggressively, she would have struggled with her last breath against him. Pity and gratitude prevailed, and she consented at last to go through the formal marriage ceremony.

So it came to pass that Matt Watson, mariner, and Andromeda Costello were married by special license in Gravesend, the very day before the man joined his ship and sailed away. The affair was kept very quiet, and when the Endells and Annie returned to the Lobster Smack, no one suspected that the dark, childlike slip of a girl was actually a married woman. It was settled, moreover, that the secret should be kept carefully until the sailor's return to claim his bride.

At the end of a year a letter was received from the wanderer, enclosing a money draft and sending loving greetings to his 'little girl' at home. By this time the whole business of the marriage seemed to Annie like a gruesome dream, faint and almost forgotten. She had grown in health and strength, and at seventeen was beginning to give signs of unusual personal beauty. Her heart was light; the man she was bound to was far away, and might perhaps never return, and with the

eagerness of girlhood she turned her thoughts away from the only recollection that was a shadow on her young life.

Months passed on, spring and summer came and went, and there was no further sign or message from the sea. The second year passed and the wanderer was still absent, still silent. The third year and part of the fourth came, and there seemed little or no likelihood that the missing man would ever return.

* * * * *

‘Tell ’e what it is,’ said Job Endell to his wife as they sat together in the kitchen late at night, about a week after Annie’s return from Rayleigh — ‘tell ’e what it is : that gel’s gettin’ too much for you and me. She gives herself airs like a lady, ever since she was picked up by them young ladies up at the Rectory.’

‘You let her alone, my man,’ returned the partner of his bosom. ‘She’s all right enough, if you don’t meddle.’

‘I dessay. Then I’m to keep her on my hands all her life, I suppose? Don’t you believe it. If she don’t find out some way of earning her own living, or get married again——’

‘You know well enough she can’t do that,’ cried Mrs. Endell sharply. ‘Isn’t she a wedded woman?’

‘Much o’ that!’ said the landlord, with an ugly grin. ‘Matt Watson’s a dead un—has been a dead un any time these three year. D’ye think if he was alive he wouldn’t have come back long afore this? Unless,’ he added, chuckling, ‘he’s changed his mind about Anniedromedy, and settled down with some black donna in Fiji or South America.’

‘You’re a fool, Job Endell!’ returned the old woman.

‘Oh, indeed. Am I a fool?—and why?’

‘Because only one thing would keep poor Matt from coming back to the gel he loves and has married, and that one thing’s the end which comes, soon or late, to all of us. Ah, dear! ah, dear! I begin to think that he’s dead and drowned, arter all.’

‘O’ course he is.’

‘And if that’s so, what’s to become of that poor lass? Not twenty years old, and a widdy woman already.’

Job grinned again, and winked diabolically.

‘She’s a handsome gel, a strapping gel, and it’ll be her own fault if she remains a widdy. What’s to prewent her taking the first chance as comes her way? Nothink as I knows on. But she turns up her nose at folk in her own spear of life; a man as gets his bread by the sweat of his brow ain’t good

enough for her. She's set her 'art on catching a swell, or somethink else out of the ordinary. Well, I've no objection, only I wish she'd look sharp about it.'

'She talked t'other day,' said the woman thoughtfully, 'of going right away from here. I s'pose we couldn't force her to stay if she'd a mind to go?'

'I don't know about that,' returned Endell. 'But didn't I tell 'e her head was turned?'

Upstairs in a little attic bedroom the subject of their conversation was lying awake, and watching the white rays of the summer moon as they crept through the narrow window and flooded the floor with silver. Her bed was hard and narrow, the room she occupied wretchedly furnished; but on a coarse table by the bedside were some wild-flowers—marigolds from the marshes, and daffodils from the Benfleet shallows, in a jug of spring water, and the nightdress she wore, though of coarse stuff, was of virgin whiteness. Her black hair fell loose upon the pillow, framing her fair face in jet, and her eyes shone brightly, full of the joy and the brightness of her young life.

She had tried in vain to sleep; yet, though she was awake, her thoughts were far away—in Dreamland, following her Fairy Prince. Hour by hour she had been yielding more and more to

the charm he had woven round her, and now she was ready to obey the lifting of his finger, if he only cared to beckon.

Her face darkened, her eyes grew wild and troubled.

A dark shadow was passing before her—the shadow of the man who was far away, living and waiting, or lying at the bottom of the deep sea. She saw him again, monster-like, with those strange marks upon his arms and breast, the rings in his ears, the wild locks falling round his swarthy face. He looked at her and smiled, showing his white teeth. With a sob, she hid her face on the pillow, putting out her hands as if to thrust him away.

And down below, in another chamber, her Fairy Prince was sound asleep, dreaming the lightsome dreams of a soul as yet untouched by great love or sorrow. Although he had woven the charm, he was quite unconscious that he had done so. To him Annie of Canvey was merely a pretty girl, with whom it was pleasant to beguile a summer hour. Little did he fancy that Chance or Time, or that Love which influences both so strangely, would ever bind her to him in a chain which only Death might sever.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FAIRY PRINCE.

AT breakfast one morning Bufton announced his intention of returning to London without delay. He had finished his most important picture ; he was longing again for the dingy pastures of Bohemia ; and there were, moreover, certain urgent private affairs which demanded his immediate attention.

‘ And you’re coming, too, youngster,’ he asserted. ‘ I don’t mean to leave you behind me. From what I’ve seen and heard, you’ve been here too long already, so pack up your traps at once, and prepare to follow your leader.’

‘ Where is the hurry?’ said Somerset. ‘ London is empty ; all the world is away shooting or yachting, and the cry of the early milkman rings through the desolate squares and houses with the blinds drawn down. I’m very comfortable here, and mean to remain.’

‘No, you don’t ; you mean to go, unless you’re a howling cad, which I hope isn’t the case.’

‘What do you mean?’ cried the young man, darkening.

‘I mean this, sir,’ returned Bufton, leaning forward and fixing the other with his baleful, blood-shot eye. ‘Every day you remain here you are doing more and more mischief. I’ve been watching that girl. I thought at first it was only a lark—on her side as well as yours—but, by ——! she’s taking you seriously, and if the thing goes on there’ll be the devil to pay!’

Somerset forced a laugh, but it was clear that the suggestion made him exceedingly uncomfortable.

‘Then you think I’d better levant?’ he muttered.

‘If you don’t, I’ll warn the old woman to turn you out neck and crop. She doesn’t suspect the length to which things have gone, but I can open her eyes in a jiffy.’

‘My dear Billy,’ said Somerset, resuming his usual light manner, ‘things have not gone to any serious length, I assure you. I admire the girl, I like to talk to her—in fact, we’re quite friendly and chummy—but upon my soul that’s all. The fact is, she’s a thoroughly sensible little woman, and not at all addicted to spooning. Neverthe-

less, if you in your supreme wisdom think it advisable, I'm quite willing to cut it.'

'Very well,' replied Bufton dryly ; 'we're off to-morrow.'

'Then we'd better take the yawl as far as Erith, and leave it there till we want it again. I wish we could have stayed another week, for I've almost persuaded Annie to sit to me for her portrait. However, to show you I'm *not* a cad, have it all your own way.'

The greater part of that day was spent in preparing the little yacht for departure. They had used her very little during their stay at the inn, and she needed overhauling. Somerset, in his shirt-sleeves, busied himself on board, while Bufton on shore began packing his impedimenta.

The news of their imminent departure caused little surprise to the innkeeper and his wife. Job was a little sorry, for the presence of his visitors meant many a glass of his favourite tippie, to say nothing of much pleasant conversation. Mrs. Endell, on the other hand, felt relieved ; for she had foreseen from the first, with a woman's keen instinct, that Somerset was a dangerously fascinating person.

And Annie? If her spirit was troubled by the prospect of parting with her new acquaintance,

she gave no sign whatever of either annoyance or regret. On the contrary, she was unusually lively that day, singing about the house, and laughing aloud on the slightest provocation.

‘What did I tell you?’ whispered the old woman to her husband. ‘She ain’t fool enough to care about gentlefolk.’

Job grinned and shook his head, without troubling himself to reply.

It rained heavily that evening, after several weeks of summer sunshine. Between eight and nine o’clock, when the two artists sat smoking their pipes in the sitting-room after dinner, Mrs. Endell came to her husband, who was busy among the bottles in the bar.

‘Where’s Anniedromedy?’ she asked. ‘I’ve been looking for her all over the house, and I can’t find her.’

‘I ain’t seen her,’ replied Job. ‘She can’t be out of doors in this weather.’

‘She was here right enough just before I took in the gentlemen’s dinner,’ exclaimed his wife. ‘Take a look at the door, and see if you can find her.’

Job went to the front-door, and looked out and around. The sun had set, and a black pall of smoky cloud was drawn over the sky; the rain was pouring down in torrents, and thick folds of

damp mist were hanging over the marshes and the river.

‘Anniedromedy!’ he called, but the only answer he received was the loud murmur of the rain and the whistle of the rising wind. His wife joined him, and they stood at the door together.

‘No sign on her,’ muttered Job ; ‘she must be somewhere about the house.’

However, they looked everywhere, and could not find her. An hour later, as they sat anxiously waiting in the kitchen, in she came, bareheaded, and soaked through and through. The moment she entered Mrs. Endell sprang up excitedly, and demanded where she had been.

‘Out on the sea wall,’ she replied sullenly.

‘Lord save us! in such weather! Be ye going mad?’

The girl laughed curiously, and strolling over to the fire, stood looking down into it, while her thin raiment steamed with the warmth.

‘I ain’t sugar, mother,’ she said, ‘to melt with a drop of rain. There’s going to be a storm. It’s lightning out yonder at the Nore, and you can hear the growling of the sea.’

Mrs. Endell glanced at her husband, who shrugged his shoulders significantly.

‘You’re a queer girl,’ he cried. ‘Well, you’d best be off to bed.’

‘I ain’t tired,’ answered Annie, seating herself on a stool by the fire.

‘Do as I tell you. If you sit up with them things on, you’ll maybe catch your death.’

‘No fear of that, mother,’ answered the girl, with another short laugh; ‘and if I did, p’r’aps you’d think it was good riddance. All right,’ she added in answer to another angry exclamation, ‘I’ll go directly; I’m snug enough here by the fire.’

Just then the bell of the sitting-room rang, and Mrs. Endell answered the summons. She returned immediately with the intimation that the gentlemen wanted her husband to join them in the parlour. Off Job went, and found his guests seated in a cloud of smoke, with a bottle and glasses before them. They requested him to sit down, while Somerset poured him out a glass of whisky.

‘This is our last night at the Lobster Smack, as you’re aware,’ said the young man. ‘Tomorrow, Job, we shall vanish away into the great world, and you’ll forget that we have ever been.’

‘No, no, Mr. Somerset,’ replied the old man, leering and chuckling, ‘I shan’t forget you in a hurry, nor Mr. Bufton neither. Your ’ealth, gents, and I ’ope you’ll soon be back to Canvey.’

He tossed off his glass and smacked his lips.

‘Canvey will never see one of us again,’ said Bufton dryly. ‘I don’t know about myself, but this youngster here has other fish to fry. He’s going to be married!’

‘Shut up, can’t you!’ cried Somerset, flushing angrily.

‘Why should I shut up? It’s the fact, isn’t it?’

‘That’s my business. And I’ll trouble you to mind your own affairs!’

Bufton grinned diabolically, and winked with his Cyclopean eye at Endell.

‘He’s bashful, you see, and doesn’t like it to be talked about; but I know how interested you must be in his future, and I want you to remind him to send you a bit of cake. It’s no use swearing, youngster; you know I’m only speaking the truth. After all, what is there to be ashamed of? Most men marry, don’t they, Job? And philosophers tell us it’s better to get the operation over early.’

He ceased with a grim laugh, while Somerset, pale with annoyance, sprang to his feet and stood looking out of the window. The landlord lingered a few minutes longer, and then, with more good wishes, left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

The moment he had gone Somerset wheeled round and faced his tormentor.

‘I know why you did that,’ he cried, between his set teeth.

‘Of course you do,’ returned Bufton quietly. ‘You’d be a fool if you didn’t.’

‘You want the girl to know it. You want to make her think——’

‘I want the little fool to know the truth,’ interrupted Bufton quietly. ‘I don’t want her to fret her heart out after you’re gone away.’

‘How kind we are! how considerate!’ sneered the young man, walking angrily up and down the room. ‘To think of it! Billy Bufton posing as a moralist! Billy Bufton putting on the airs of a parson! Why, confound you! you ought to wipe your own slate clean before you presume to set me sums in good conduct.’

Bufton leaned back in his chair and laughed good-naturedly; then his face grew serious again, and he said:

‘I don’t set up for a saint, but on the other hand, I do my bad deeds in the open. I don’t lie, and cheat, and pretend to be better than I am. I don’t attempt to gammon anyone into the notion that I’m a wingless angel, as you do. I don’t, above all, pose as a moralist or a parson! No, my son, I judge things by the standard of common-sense; and if you did the same, you’d see that you’re not playing a square game.’

‘How, pray?’

‘Because, in the first place, you’ve flattered a certain person into the belief that your admiration for her is serious, and that your ulterior views might be matrimonial; whereas you have been aware all the time that nothing can ever come of the flirtation. It wouldn’t matter, I dare say, if the girl belonged to the ordinary chuckleheaded species. She doesn’t—she’s different. She’s a good little girl, and too much in earnest.’

Somerset continued to pace to and fro, while Bufton sat quietly watching him. At last he paused, saying:

‘I dare say you’re right, Billy, but upon my life I never meant any harm. It’s a hard thing that a fellow can’t be civil to a pretty girl without having his attentions so abominably misconstrued.’

‘Gammon!’ growled the cynic. ‘I’ve heard that story before. Civility’s one thing and spooning is quite another. The sooner you get back to Bloomsbury the better.’

While the two friends were thus exchanging compliments, Job Endell had carried his report out to the kitchen, where Annie was still sitting in company with the old woman. The announcement of Somerset’s engagement and approaching marriage was soon made, and was heard by Annie with seeming indifference, only the deep sullen

flame in her eyes giving any indication of emotion. Presently she rose and announced her intention of retiring for the night. A few minutes later she was in her little room at the top of the house.

The rain was beating fiercely on the pane, and the wind was whistling shrilly as she walked to the window and looked out. Beyond her and around her all was darkness and desolation. The storm had come, but a more terrible storm was rising in her heart.

Until the announcement of Somerset's departure she had scarcely realized how much his bright presence had meant to her. His sunny smile, his winning ways, his elegant and courtly manners, had been a revelation to her of the world in which she had never lived, of a world where men were fair and gentle, and not rough and wild, and where fairy princes were still possible. All her instincts, for some mysterious reason, were refined ; the only human creatures she had envied were the ladies who wore delicate raiment, and were soft-spoken, and lived in an atmosphere of gracious gentleness. How she had longed to be one of them ; to escape from her coarse surroundings, and to exchange her homely associations for the light, the life, the music, of good society ! All the men she had known were clowns and boors, or semi-savages, like the man who had brought her from the Sea ;

nearly all the women were coarse creatures, vulgar shrews and viragos for the most part, subject to ignorant prejudices and ignoble passions. As long as she could recollect, however, she had felt herself to be different, loathing everything that was coarse and common, yearning towards everything that was refined and pure. Yes, God had meant her she thought, for a 'lady,' though a fatality had cast her into the social mire.

Feelings like these had been strongly fostered at Rayleigh, where she had gone at her own request to learn dressmaking, and where she had attracted the attention of the young ladies at the Rectory. Ever eager to escape from her surroundings, she had clutched at every opportunity of self-education, and had endeavoured by sedulous imitation to refine her manners and her speech. The young ladies had lent her books — semi-religious romances for the most part—and these, with other tales less orthodox and more enthralling, had developed her dreams and fancies still more.

With all this she had remained a true child of the Sea, vigorous, fearless, full of health and power. She could row and sail a boat, swim like a duck, and was familiar with the winds and tides.

Then, just as the weight of loneliness lay most heavily upon her, and she was longing to escape

for ever from her desolate environment, she had come face to face with Somerset, the very incarnation of her ideal. Had he passed her by without notice, it might have been different; but her beauty had drawn her to him, and his flattering tongue had completed the conquest of her heart.

And now he was going away, possibly for ever! And they had told her that he was to marry, in the near future, a lady in his own sphere of society. She remembered the photograph she had seen in his room, and had no doubt in her mind that it represented the lady of his choice.

As she stood gazing forth into the desolate night, and listening to the murmur of rain and wind, her face was white as death, and her eyes were misted with burning tears. Her thoughts went out in dread to the man who had left her there and wandered out on the Sea—the strange, wild, half-savage sailor who had given her his name. If he should return! If, after all, he should be living and sailing back to claim her! A little while ago she could have borne to think such a contingency possible, but now her soul sickened at the very thought.

* * * * *

The next morning, when she descended, after a sleepless night, there was a brief respite to her anxiety. Although the rain had ceased, it was

blowing 'great guns' from the south-east, and the two artists decided that it would be unwise to navigate the little yawl up the Thames in such weather. They determined, therefore, to wait until the next day, when the storm would, in all probability, have blown over.

Early in the forenoon Annie left the inn and wandered across the island in the direction of the mainland. She yearned, yet dreaded, to have a last meeting with Somerset, and finally her instinct led her to avoid the meeting if possible by keeping carefully out of the way. So she seized the opportunity of going on a message to Benfleet village and bringing back certain household stores of which Mrs. Endell stood in need.

She was absent the greater part of the day. At last, towards sunset, she left Benfleet, carrying a loaded basket on her arm, and wended her way through the woods which led towards Hadleigh Creek, and thence across to Canvey. The weather was still dark and threatening, but the wind had fallen, and it was clear that the worst of the storm was over.

Slowly and wearily, for her heart was heavy within her, she passed through the shadows of the woods, following an old cart-road overgrown with weeds and grass and shadowed with overhanging trees, which shook their raindrops down upon her

as she passed. All was dark and still, but now and then a startled rabbit rose from the grass and shot away before her, and from time to time a jay cried discordantly from the neighbouring umbrage.

She was walking slowly along, full of her sad thoughts, when the sound of a footstep startled her. She looked up and found herself face to face with Somerset.

As she drew back startled, he approached her, not bright and smiling as usual, but looking almost as pale and troubled as herself. His old light manner had departed, he was constrained, almost awkward.

‘Forgive me for coming to meet you,’ he said. ‘I wanted to speak to you before I went away.’

Her eyes dilated, her breath came and went quickly ; she tried to be calm, but could not, and in her embarrassment she looked almost angry.

‘That basket is too heavy for you,’ he cried, while she hesitated. ‘Let me carry it for you.’

‘No, no!’ she murmured, moving forward impatiently, as if to avoid further conversation.

But he kept by her side.

‘You’re not angry?’ he asked.

Her eyes flashed.

‘Why should I be angry?’ she cried. ‘Oh, please leave me, sir ; I’ve got to hurry home.’

He said nothing, but continued to keep pace

with her, glancing ever and anon at her averted face. Presently he spoke again, nervously and rapidly :

‘I don’t want you to think me a howling cad, and that’s why I’ve come to meet you. You see, Annie’ (as he named her her face went crimson, then deadly pale), ‘I’ve been so glad to meet you, and to think we might be friends. I didn’t quite realize at first—upon my soul I didn’t!—that other people might regard the affair differently and fancy that I was a selfish fool, trifling with your affections, but now I see my mistake, and I want you to forgive me.’

Her bosom heaved, while her face darkened. As the reader may guess, the nature of his apology was not diplomatic.

‘It doesn’t matter what other people think,’ she returned coldly. ‘I never thought you were a fool, sir, or fancied that you were anything but a true gentleman.’

‘Thank you for saying that.’

She stopped short, looking him full in the face, and breathing quickly.

‘Is it true you’re going to be married, sir?’ she asked.

‘I’m afraid it is,’ he answered, averting his eyes. Then, noticing the strange expression on her face, and seeing her eyes full of tears, he cried im-

pulsively, with a forced laugh : ‘ I’m engaged to my cousin. It’s an old affair, with not much sentiment on either side. You don’t mind, do you ?’

As he spoke, he placed his hand softly upon her arm, and looked keenly into her face. In a moment she shook herself free, and then, trembling, held out her hand.

‘ Good-bye, sir. I hope you’ll be very happy,’ she said.

She endeavoured to draw her hand away, but he retained it in his grasp.

‘ You won’t forget me altogether?’ he said softly. ‘ You’ll forgive me if I’ve ever offended you, and think of me sometimes?’

Their faces were close together. Suddenly, to his amazement, she bent forward, her cheeks burning, her eyes streaming with tears, and kissed him full upon the lips. Then, before he could recover from his surprise, she freed herself from his hold, and ran rapidly away.

Too troubled and stupefied to follow, he watched her till she disappeared in the shadow of the woods.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLIGHT OF 'PRINCE CHARMING.'

EARLY the next day, the storm having abated, and the gale having changed to a stiff breeze from the south-east, the friends started up the Thames with a fair wind and a free sheet, on the first flow of the rising tide. Bufton held the tiller of the little yawl, while Somerset was at work forward. Before many minutes had passed they were slipping swiftly up towards Gravesend, keeping close to the Kentish side of the river.

It was a dark and somewhat chilly morning. A dull, rainy mist hung over Canvey and the low hills of Essex. Gloomy as the prospect on which he gazed, Somerset sat down on the 'coach-roof,' lit his pipe, and looked back towards the lonely island.

All the morning, while they had been preparing to sail, he had seen nothing of Annie, who appeared to have hidden herself away ; but just as he had

hoisted up the anchor, and they were drifting out towards the river, he saw her standing at the inn door, behind Job Endell and his wife, who were waving their farewell. He had taken off his hat and waved it, but, though the others had eagerly and effusively responded, the girl had made no sign.

So he sat and smoked gloomily, while the wind and tide set up river, and numberless barges and small craft swept in the same direction as the little yawl. At last Bufton, who had been quietly watching him, broke the silence.

‘Cheer up, youngster,’ he said. ‘Think of the other little woman waiting yonder.’

‘That’s all very well, Billy,’ was the reply, ‘but I can’t help feeling awfully hipped and sorry. I’m afraid I’ve made a fool of myself. That’s nothing new, I suppose you’ll say ; but it’s the girl I’m thinking about, not myself. What is to become of her in that infernal solitude? Upon my life, I believe she’ll break her heart ; I don’t mean for me, but out of sheer misery in her surroundings.’

‘Her surroundings are no worse than they were before you turned up,’ said Bufton dryly. ‘She belongs to the amphibia, and is happier there than she’d be high and dry with a landlubber like you. Besides, Mister Right may come back from the briny ocean, and then——’

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'Oh, hang him!' cried the young man impatiently. 'I hope he's at the bottom of the Sea.'

'That's a nasty wish,' returned Bufton, with a grin.

'She's a girl in a thousand,' continued Somerset, pursuing his own reflections, and not heeding the interruption, 'and her heart is breaking in the horrid atmosphere she is doomed to breathe. Well might they christen her Andromeda! There she is, chained to a rock as it were, waiting in despair for the appearance of the marine Monster. No hope for her, no friend to advise and succour her. It makes me sick to think of it—heart-sick—and sicker still to know that I can't help her.'

Bufton nodded grimly.

'Of course you can't, and you should have remembered that before you began spooning her. She was happy enough, no doubt, before you appeared on the scene, posing as a sort of Bloomsbury Perseus.'

'I don't believe she was happy,' answered Somerset. 'How could she be with such a life behind her? God meant her for a lady. You don't know how good she is—how refined. And then her beauty! Did you ever see anything to surpass it, even on canvas? Ah, well, it's all over, I suppose! I can only hope and pray that

she'll find some sort of deliverance. Even now I'd cut off my right hand to help her.'

So the two men talked as the little yawl ran up the river.

Meantime, left alone on Canvey Island, Annie was conscious of an aching heart indeed. Her Fairy Prince had vanished, never perhaps to return. She knew now—it had come upon her on that night of their last parting—that there was no rest for her, no peace, without his sunny presence. Had he been content to take her away with him, how willing she would have been to remain his slave, his handmaiden, asking nothing for her life-long service but a kindly look, a loving smile! But had he not told her with his own lips that it was hopeless, that he belonged to another? and had she not seen in his eyes, even as she kissed him in the moment of impulse and despairing passion, that his only wish was to spare her pain?

Unable to bear the scrutiny of Endell and his wife, but forcing a happy smile to hide her utter misery, she crept from the dreary house and passed quickly inland across the marshes; then, following a path she knew, she gained the sea wall on the northern side of the island, and gazed with eager eyes up the river. Far away towards Gravesend, on the Kentish shore, among the countless barges

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creeping along shore, and beyond the great vessels passing homeward in mid-channel, she saw one little sail, small as a sea-bird's wing—the sail of the little yacht that was carrying her Fairy Prince away. Fainter and smaller it grew, till the mist and smoke hid it altogether from her gaze. Then, with her dark eyes dim with burning tears, she threw herself down on the sea wall, murmuring the lost one's name.

Presently her tears ceased, and her face grew fixed in pallor, while her black eyebrows contracted and her eyes grew full of angry flame.

All her spirit was rising in revolt against the cruelty, the misery, of her fortune. Why had she not been born a lady, like her whom he was to marry? Why, all her days, had she been surrounded with hateful scenes, hateful people? Why had she not died, a little child, on the ship from which she took her name, instead of being snatched from the waters and reserved for such a wretched future? Why, she asked herself, should she not die now, when she realized at last, in all its fulness, the utter hopelessness of living?

As she asked herself the question her eyes fell on the Great River, on the deep tide rushing past her Londonward, and lapping with its black lips the oozy shores of Canvey. One leap down from the sea wall, and she would be at rest for ever.

The dark mood passed, for the girl was young and full of the will to live. Passion, moreover, rather than sentiment and self-pity, was the master current of her nature, and passion soon swept her thoughts into other channels. How if she followed her dream out into the world, even to London yonder, and sought for some other, even for some stormier, environment? Other women fought for themselves and earned their own bread; why should she not do so? Anything surely would be better than the dreary and empty existence on that wretched island, so near to the murmur of the world, and yet so far removed. Yes, she would go away!

Some hours later, when she returned to the desolate inn, she appeared quite calm and self-contained; but the storm within her was only stilled, not laid, and her face was full of quiet resolve.

The old woman watched her keenly, but discovered no trace of sorrow or regret. The grim old man joked her once or twice on the subject of Somerset; her dark eyes flashed, but that was all.

Several days passed, and she remained strangely taciturn and preoccupied; but this was nothing new, and was set down to mere ill-temper.

‘The gel grows worse and worse,’ growled old

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Job to his wife. 'There ain't a word to be got out of her.'

At last, about a week after Somerset's departure, Annie left the house at early morning, and without any intimation of her intention, set out for Rayleigh. It was low water, and her way lay right across the island towards Hadleigh Creek, crossing which by a narrow plank, she gained the meadows between Hadleigh and Benfleet, and thence, passing through the woods, she emerged on the highway.

It was a fine summer day, the sun was shining brightly on wood and meadow, the birds singing, and a soft breeze blowing inland from the southwest. Familiar with every footstep of the way, she wandered on by highway and byway till she came in sight of Rayleigh village, and ascending the steep hill leading into the main street, halted at last at the garden gate of a small cottage on the roadside. Roses and pinks brightened the garden, and at the open window of the house a girl sat sewing.

As Annie opened the gate and crossed the garden path the girl looked up surprised, and then nodded and smiled. In another moment Annie was at the open window, looking in and shaking hands.

'Sakes alive, Annie!' cried the girl, 'where have

you dropped from? I thought you were over at the island.'

She was a pale, rather sickly-looking girl, several years younger than Annie. Her hair was very fair, almost flaxen, her eyes blue and wistful, her features somewhat pinched, and not at all pretty. Her shoulders stooped as if under a load, and when she stood up she scarcely reached to the other's shoulder.

The table of the room in which she sat, a poorly furnished parlour, was littered with dressmaking materials, and she herself was busily working at a cotton gown. Over her head, attached to the window-sash, was a printed card with the legend :

ELIZABETH LAWRENCE, DRESSMAKER.

Annie seated herself on the window-sill, and leaning back, looked down quietly at her friend. Her face was set and pale, but her eyes were full of light and fire.

'Yes, I've been down there right enough,' she said, after a pause, 'but I'm sick of it—sick and tired—and I'm going away.'

'Going away! Where?'

'I don't know,' was the troubled reply. 'To London, perhaps. Anywhere out of Canvey.'

'That's strange,' said the other, looking at her thoughtfully. 'You were glad enough to go back,

Annie. You soon got tired of dressmaking—now, didn't you ?'

'Yes, I suppose so. I get tired of most things. I think Mother Endell was right when she said there was a devil in me.'

And indeed as she spoke she looked the very reverse of angelic. The hot blood came back into her face, her mouth quivered angrily, and her black eyebrows gathered in a frown.

'Something has been going wrong, Annie,' said the dressmaker gently. 'You're different since you went back home.'

Annie nodded, and the frown on her features softened to a curious smile, so that her face almost brightened.

'You're right, Bess, and you're wrong,' she replied. 'It's true enough I've been worried, but it's true also that I've been happier than I've been for many a long day. Can you guess why?'

Bess, as she had called her, looked at her thoughtfully for some moments, and then gazed down at the dress on her lap as she replied :

'I heard that you'd folk staying at the inn—gentlemen from London.'

Annie nodded again, and her face grew still brighter. Bess looked up quickly, and their eyes met. The look was like a charm to open the full heart and loosen the eager tongue. A few

minutes later Annie, girl-like, had poured all her secret into the ears of her sympathetic friend, who dropped her hands into her lap and listened spell-bound. She told of her meeting with Somerset, of his grace and fascination, of his quietly expressed admiration, and of the spell which he had succeeded in casting over her. Poor Bess, who had often dreamed of such a lover, heard her rapturously to the end.

‘That’s why I came over,’ said Annie. ‘I wanted to tell you what had happened, for oh, Bess, you don’t know how good he is and how I love him! All this time I’ve had no one to tell it to, and it made my heart ache to keep so silent; and now he’s gone away——’

‘Gone away!’ echoed Bess. ‘He is gone, then?’

‘Gone, and maybe for ever. Gone away to London, Bess, where his friends live. He sailed up the river a week ago, and I suppose he’ll never come back. But I don’t mind. I love him! I love him! I love him! And I don’t care now who knows it; and, more than that, in his heart I believe he loves *me*.’

Bess sighed and shook her head.

‘If he’d have cared for you like that,’ she said, ‘he’d have said so, wouldn’t he, and asked you to marry him?’

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Whereupon Annie had to confess the truth, that she had heard from the young man's own lips that he was pledged to marry his cousin. As she made the confession, her face darkened again, while the old fire flashed from her eyes.

'I don't want him to marry me!' she cried passionately. 'Maybe I couldn't marry him if he asked me. All I want is just to love him, to think about him, to remember how good he was to me—as good, and as respectful too, as if I was a lady. Oh, Bess dear, you don't know what it is to feel like that. It's just as if I'd been born again and filled up with warmth and sunshine. Yes, it's fine to be in love, even when you know it can come to naught, for it makes all the world seem different, just like the first summer day after a long winter.'

Poor Bess sighed again, for it was quite true that she had never experienced the emotions so rapturously described. Her heart, however, palpitated with girlish sympathy.

Annie went on :

'But what I wanted to say, Bess dear, is this. Now that he's gone away, I feel that I can't stay with the folk at Canvey. I should go mad if I stopped any longer, or I should drown myself, or do something dreadful. I can't breathe—I can't live there. I must go away, as I told you ; and what I was thinking of was that you and me might

go to London together, and start dressmaking there. I wouldn't idle, I'd work hard, and perhaps—perhaps—some day——'

She paused, for Bess was looking at her in positive stupefaction, the proposal was so amazing, so unexpected, the scheme, to Bess's simple country intelligence, so quixotic.

'Oh Annie, you can't be serious!' she exclaimed. 'London is a dreadful place for those who have neither friends nor money. It's easy enough to earn one's living down in Rayleigh here, where everybody knows me, but in London people would only laugh at me, and I should starve. I've never been rightly prenticed, you see, and don't know the dressmaking like London women; and, besides that, I like the country best, and should never think of trusting myself so far from home.'

'Very well,' said Annie emphatically, 'I shall go alone, that's all.'

'You'll never think of it!' cried Bess. 'You don't know what might happen to you, all alone in the City. Many and many a girl has gone there to seek her fortune, and found it only in the streets or down in the black river.'

'And what then?' returned Annie, almost fiercely. 'It would be living, at any rate; it wouldn't be creeping and crawling, like a snail on

the sea-wall. I want to be something, to do something, and not to live on useless down here.'

'But they'll never let you go.'

'Won't they? Perhaps I shan't ask them. They're neither kith nor kin of mine, and they've no rights over me. Besides, they'll be glad enough to get rid of me—make no mistake about that.'

Presently, as the excitement of that first confession wore away, Annie grew calmer, and, entering the little sitting-room, sat down by Bess's side, and talked to her more quietly. But she had quite made up her mind that she would not remain on Canvey Island. She would rather, she said, go into service of some kind far away.

Not a word did she breathe to Bess, who knew nearly all her secrets, of the ceremony which united her to the man who was still absent on the great ocean. That secret had been well kept from the beginning, and now, more than ever, she shrank from revealing it to any living soul.

CHAPTER IX.

STRANGE TIDINGS.

ELIZABETH LAWRENCE, or Bess, as everybody called her, was the orphan daughter of a Leigh fisherman, who had been drowned during her infancy in a great storm off the Nore, and who had been soon followed to the grave in Leigh churchyard by his wife, a delicate young woman, who had never quite recovered from an illness following on the birth of her only child. Left alone in the world, the little girl had been sheltered under the roof of a kindly neighbour, and secured from complete destitution by the interest of a small sum of money accruing from an insurance on her father's life. Frail and delicate, like her mother, she had learned at an early age to add to her slender means by dressmaking and millinery work, and finally had settled down in business at Rayleigh.

Annie and she had been close friends for some years, the very contrast in their temperaments being the secret of their attraction for each other. Bess, though plain and unattractive, was thoughtful and fond of reading, while Annie, strong and fresh as the ocean breezes, and fair to look on as a ship at sea, was too full of the joy of life to care much for books or sedentary pleasures. For a time, at her own request, she had assisted her friend at the dressmaking ; but the occupation had soon wearied one who was yearning for the air and sunshine, and she had returned again to the wild and comparatively independent life on Canvey Island.

Nevertheless, under the little dressmaker's influence, she had grown gentler and more refined, and Bess opened to her eager vision the fairy world of poetry and romance. Little as she cared for reading generally, she had found boundless pleasure in the stories and romances they had read together—poor enough rubbish for the most part, dealing chiefly with the love affairs of unreal and impossible lords and ladies, but appealing on that very account the more strongly to Annie's sympathies. And Bess, moreover, with her shrinking delicacy, was full of romantic fancies and dreams, so that her influence fostered and fed all that was most fantastic in Annie's imagination.

Another influence, to which we have formerly alluded, came from the neighbouring Vicarage. The Vicar of Rayleigh, a cheery widower of sixty, had two daughters, one about Annie's own age, the other five or six years older. The elder, Miss Jane Nettleship, was a gentle and very reserved young woman, deeply religious, and with few or no personal attractions; the younger, Miss Mary, was a buoyant and tolerably good-looking young lady, very energetic in district-visiting, but not indisposed, in an innocent way, to pleasant flirtations. In all affairs that were agreeable in life, the senior sister sacrificed her own wishes to gratify those of her junior, whom she was content to regard as her superior in personal charm and attraction.

When Annie had come over to assist Bess Lawrence at the dressmaking, she had made the acquaintance of these young ladies, the Misses Bountiful of the district, and they had taken a strong fancy to her from the day of their first meeting. Miss Jane particularly had treated her with characteristic kindness, and so from time to time, when there was dressmaking to be done, Annie had been a welcome visitor at the Vicarage. There, among the refinements of a well-to-do English household, among surroundings as pleasant and subdued as the shadows in the Vicarage garden,

the girl's stormy and passionate nature had found peace and restfulness, and her latent instinct towards refinement of thought and feeling had been permanently aroused.

That night Annie stayed with Bess at the cottage. The girls slept together—or, rather, lay awake together; for a goodly part of the night was occupied in further exchange of confessions and confidences. Next morning Annie went off alone to the Vicarage to interview the young ladies.

On the summit of a hill on the outskirts of the village stood the old stone church, surrounded by the graves of many generations, and adjoining the churchyard were the Vicarage and the Vicarage gardens. The front of the house, covered with ivy and creepers of all descriptions, looked out across a little green lawn on to the dusty highway, and busy in the front of the house, with a straw hat on his head and an old alpaca coat on his back, was the Vicar. A large pair of garden-scissors in his hand, he was pruning the creepers which overhung the porch. A tall and somewhat portly man, gray-haired and clean-shaven, he scarcely looked his age. His face was plump and brown, his eyes bright and cheerful, his whole appearance that of a man at peace with all the world, as indeed he might well be, for

his living there was worth nearly a thousand a year, and his parishioners gave him very little trouble.

As Annie entered the gate and came up the path towards the house, he turned his face towards her, recognising her with a nod and a smile.

‘Welcome, Annie of Canvey!’ he cried playfully, holding out his hand. ‘You find me busy as usual among my creepers and my roses. My girls were talking about you only this morning, and wondering whether you had forgotten them altogether.’

‘I hadn’t forgotten, sir,’ replied Annie, smiling; ‘I’ve been coming over again and again, but something always kept me back.’

‘No doubt, no doubt,’ returned the Vicar. ‘We must not forget, my dear, that you belong to the human amphibia, born on the ocean, cradled by the storms, surrounded from birth by sea and tide, eh? Ah, what a pity you were not born a man, for then, Annie, you might have been a sailor in good earnest.’

‘I hate the Sea,’ cried the girl, while her face clouded.

‘So I’ve heard you say; but the sea-salt is in your blood, for all that, and you’ll never be a landsman, Annie. Well, how is Job Endell, and the good woman who owns him? Tell them

when you return that I'm coming over soon for another day's coursing.'

'Can I speak to the young ladies, sir?' asked Annie, after a pause.

'My daughter Mary is out visiting,' replied the Vicar, 'but you'll find Miss Jane in the old garden. By-the-by, what about the dressmaking? Do you still think of following it, or have you given up the notion altogether?'

'Yes, sir, I think so,' replied Annie.

'Just so,' said the Vicar, laughing. 'Didn't I warn you? Sitting indoors, needle in hand, will never suit you, my dear. The sea-salt again, Annie! There's no shaking it away. You'll have to be a sailor's wife or nothing.'

Her face was averted, so that he could not perceive the black shadow that passed over it, or the angry light that flashed out of her eyes. She turned away trembling, and passing through the open door, along a broad lobby, entered the garden at the back of the house—a large, old-fashioned garden on the slope of the hill, and commanding the summer landscape for many a mile. There, in a corner of the large, smooth-shaven lawn, surrounded with shrubs and arbutus-trees, she found Miss Jane seated, with a work-table before her, busy at needlework.

Thin and tall, with kindly dark eyes and

features somewhat pinched, was the Vicar's eldest daughter. Her dress was plain and simple, her whole appearance suggestive of modest tastes and wishes. She looked up as Annie approached, and greeted her with a pleasant smile. Then, motioning her to take an empty garden-chair which stood at her side, she said:

'Mary has gone up the village. She'll be back almost directly.' As Annie stood hesitating, with the shadow still upon her face, she added, 'Is anything the matter, Annie? Why have you come over?'

'Nothing's the matter, miss,' answered Annie, while her under-lip trembled and her eyes filled with tears, 'only, only—I want to go away.'

'To go away!' repeated Miss Jane. 'I don't understand.'

Then, in her impulsive way, the girl explained that she was weary of dwelling on the lonely island, and yearning to earn her bread somewhere, preferably in London. Here the confession ceased, for she said nothing of her acquaintance with Somerset, or of the stormy emotions which had been awakened in her by her recent experience. The Vicar's daughter listened to her quietly, watching her all the time with grave, thoughtful eyes.

'Sit down, Annie, and tell me all about it,' she

said presently. 'You didn't always feel as you feel now. You used to love your home. What has changed you?'

The girl's face flushed, and her breath came and went sharply. She sat down in the garden-chair, and averting her eyes, answered in a low voice :

'I'm not changed, miss ; I'm not changed at all. I've always felt like that about Canvey Island.'

'But only the other day you were so eager to get back.'

'Only because I was tired of dressmaking. But when I did go back the place seemed dreadful—so dull and lonesome even after Rayleigh—and now I hate it, I do indeed, and feel as if I couldn't breathe in it! So I thought I'd ask you if you knew of any place away from there where I could earn my own living as other girls do, and not be a burden on anybody.'

'That's not so easy, Annie,' returned Miss Jane. 'You wouldn't care to go out to service, and even if you did, you've no experience. What does Mrs. Endell say about it?'

'I haven't asked her advice,' was the short reply.

'That's wrong. Surely she's your best friend?'

'I don't know,' returned Annie ; 'and at any rate she'd never consent to let me go away. She's

always telling me I oughtn't to be so restless, and that I must be contented down yonder.'

'And so perhaps you ought to be,' said Miss Jane. 'Remember, we can't have everything we want in this world, and it's your duty as a good Christian to make the best of what God gives you. I'm afraid, Annie, you're a little restless. Father says it's only natural, seeing that you were born on the stormy Sea.'

'I wish I'd never been born at all!' cried Annie, stung anew by the allusion to her birth.

'You mustn't say that,' said Miss Jane, smiling gently; 'it's wicked.'

'I suppose it is, miss, and I suppose I am wicked—I can't help it. If I was a lady like you, miss, with kind friends round me, and all things peaceful and pleasant, it would be different.'

'We all have our troubles,' cried the Vicar's daughter sadly. 'Some girls would envy you your good looks and your splendid health—yes, and even the fresh air you breathe. You might have been born among the smoke of London—in some dreadful slum, where there is neither pure air nor sunshine. Ah! many and many a poor creature yonder would think it a blessing to have the freedom and the light which you despise.'

As she spoke thus, placing her hand softly on Annie's arm, a clear, girlish voice cried, 'Jane!

Jane!' and almost instantly the younger sister ran out into the garden. She wore a light straw hat, and a pretty muslin dress with a pink sash, and in her hand she waved a stylish parasol. The moment she perceived Annie, who stood up to salute her respectfully, she greeted her with an eager cry :

'You here, Annie! It's lucky that I've found you. Do you know, they're looking for you everywhere!'

'Looking for me, miss!' cried Annie tremulously. 'Who?'

'Why, old Mr. Endell from Canvey Island. He says you left the house yesterday afternoon, and didn't come back all night.'

'That's quite true, miss; I slept with Bess at the cottage.'

'But didn't you tell them where you were going?' cried Miss Mary. 'Oh, you naughty girl! Poor Mr. Endell looks quite worried and excited, and wants to speak to you at once.'

It seemed that poor Annie was doomed to look unamiable that day. Her face darkened again, and her form trembled angrily.

'You had better go to him, Annie,' said Miss Jane. 'He is naturally anxious. Mary is quite right: you ought not to have stayed away without any warning.'

‘Where is he, miss?’ asked Annie sullenly.

‘I left him close to the Falcon,’ answered Miss Mary. ‘He has someone with him—a gentleman from London.’

A gentleman from London! Annie started and went from red to pale. Who could the gentleman be? In a moment her thoughts turned towards the one being in the world whom she would have been rejoiced to see.

Taking a respectful leave of the young ladies, and promising to return, Annie passed through the Vicarage, and hastened into the open road leading into the wide main street of Rayleigh. She had only gone a little distance when she saw, close to the door of the Falcon, an old-fashioned inn facing the main street, old Job Endell standing in animated conversation with two persons—one the Vicar of Rayleigh, the other a short, elderly man in black broadcloth, who looked like a stranger. In her annoyance and irritation at Endell’s appearance she took no notice of the significant fact that the Vicar, a most precise and particular person, still wore, out in the main street, the old coat and straw hat which he had been wearing in his own garden.

As she approached the group, Endell saw her, started, and pointed towards her—angrily, she thought. The Vicar and the elderly stranger, the

latter of whom wore spectacles, also turned and surveyed her. Then the old publican, leaving the others, ran forward to meet her.

His weather-beaten face was running down with perspiration, his eyes gleaming excitedly, as he came up to her with hands extended. She shrank back, expecting a volley of abuse, but to her amazement his sinister face was wreathed in smiles.

‘Thank the Lord I’ve found ’e!’ he cried. ‘I’ve been looking up and down for ’e everywhere, Anniedromedy.’

‘Well, what do you want with me?’ she returned, frowning.

‘Want with ’e!’ chuckled the old man, seizing her eagerly by the hand. ‘Ah, that’s tellin’s, that’s tellin’s, my gel! The old woman nigh fainted when she heard on it, and there was a fine to-do arterwards at the Lobster Smack. Here, mister,’ he cried, drawing her forward, ‘here she be! Here’s Anniedromedy!’

Startled and amazed by his manner, she suffered herself to be led face to face with the elderly stranger, who smiled on her, and politely raised his hat. The Vicar stood by, beaming good-naturedly.

‘My name is Letterstone,’ said the stranger, ‘of Letterstone and Letterstone, solicitors, Gravesend. I came over personally this morning viâ Tilbury

to communicate with you on a matter of the utmost importance.'

Annie looked at him in wonder. Could he be addressing her, with that bland, paternal smile and almost deferential manner?

'Don't be alarmed, my dear,' exclaimed the Vicar, patting her on the shoulder; 'it is good news the gentleman brings, I assure you.'

'Ay, that it be!' chuckled Job Endell, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, and grinning delightedly.

'I think, gentlemen,' said the solicitor, while Annie stood pale and trembling, 'that we had better go indoors, where we can be entirely private. I can then make my communication in due form.'

So saying, he led the way into the Falcon, and into a quiet parlour at the back of the old inn. Scarcely knowing what she did or what was happening, Annie followed, and after her the Vicar and Job Endell. Then Mr. Letterstone closed the door mysteriously, and, opening a small black bag which stood upon the table, produced a number of legal documents, letters and papers.

'Sit down, Anniedromedy,' whispered Endell, drawing to her a chair. 'You'll need all your courage to bear it, when you hear what the gentleman has got to say.'

Annie sat down and waited, open-mouthed.

‘It’s good news, however, as I told you,’ said the Vicar ; ‘so don’t be afraid.’

‘O’ course it’s good news,’ murmured Endell, still smiling delightedly.

The solicitor drew a chair to the table, sat down solemnly, placed his papers before him, coughed, and addressed himself to Annie.

‘I assume,’ said the lawyer, ‘that I am addressing Andromeda Costello, who was born on the high-seas, and who was afterwards adopted by a seaman named Matthew Watson, and brought up in the house of his only sister, now deceased?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ cried Job Endell, now interposing.

‘Permit the young lady to reply for herself,’ said Letterstone, motioning Job aside, and glancing at Annie over his spectacles. ‘You are, I believe, Andromeda Costello?’

‘My name’s Annie,’ was the reply, ‘and Liza Watson brought me up.’

‘Just so—Annie, or Andromeda, Costello. Afterwards, when Watson sailed away from Gravesend on his last voyage, you were consigned to the care of Mrs. Endell, of the Lobster Smack, Canvey Island?’

Annie nodded.

‘Before your guardian sailed away on his last

voyage, when you were a young girl of only sixteen, you were married at the registrar's office at Gravesend to this same Matthew Watson?'

Annie started, and her face went crimson; then, in another moment, pale as death. Her lips quivered, the dark lines of her eyebrows met in a nervous frown, and she shrank as if she had received a blow.

'It's all right, Anniedromedy,' murmured Endell soothingly. 'Don't 'e be afraid; answer the gentleman!'

But Annie could not answer, so strange a shame fell upon her and so deep a dread. She knew now that all present, including the Vicar, had learned her secret, and she sat with darkening brows and averted eyes, without uttering a word.

The lawyer looked puzzled.

'Kindly answer me,' he said, after a pause. 'You are Andromeda Costello, and in your sixteenth year you were married to Matthew Watson?'

Still there was no answer; the girl seemed paralyzed and stupefied.

'O' course you were, Anniedromedy!' cried Job Endell. 'Me and missis was there as witnesses; and afterwards——'

Then Annie found her tongue, and, rising to her feet as if to fly from the room, she exclaimed:

‘I don’t know ; I don’t remember ! I don’t want to remember !’

‘My dear child,’ said the Vicar, rising and taking her hand, ‘there is nothing to be afraid of or ashamed of. You were very young—a mere child, in fact—and the marriage was, of course, a mere matter of form. You remember, however, that it took place?’

The girl’s agitation increased. She fluttered and trembled like a bird in the net, panting to escape from some deadly terror.

‘What is it all about?’ she panted, her dark eyes flashing from one face to the other. ‘Why have you brought me here to ask me such silly questions? Has he—has he come back?’

There was no mistaking the look of shame and terror which accompanied the query.

‘Pray calm yourself,’ said the lawyer. ‘I regret, deeply regret, to inform you that, to the best of our information, your husband is dead.’

‘Dead?’ she echoed. ‘Matt Watson?’

‘I fear so ; I am advised so. The last communication sent to us from him was despatched, I understand, only a few days before his decease.’

As he spoke, Annie sank again into her chair, and, leaning forward on the table, covered her face with her hands. Her form was shaken with

sobs, tears were streaming through her fingers, but she uttered no sound.

‘Your grief is natural, Annie,’ murmured the Vicar ; ‘nevertheless, I must entreat you to control it, and to listen to what our friend has further to communicate. It will comfort you, no doubt, to learn that the poor fellow’s last thoughts were of you, and that he did not pass away without proving his devotion.’

‘No, indeed!’ muttered Endell. ‘Tell her, mister.’

Thus appealed to, Mr. Letterstone again turned over his papers and proceeded :

‘Some weeks ago, Mrs. Watson’ (as he addressed her by her married name, Annie shuddered through and through and raised her right arm as if to avert a blow), ‘we received through our agents in Western America these papers, containing Matthew Watson’s last will and testament, duly witnessed and attested, together with a large sum of money, which has been left solely and unconditionally to you. This money we hold at your disposal, and after the requisite preliminaries and legal proof of your identity, we shall be prepared to pay it over. All that your husband possessed, in fact, is yours, and I am pleased to congratulate you on your good fortune.’

Annie remained in the same position, her face hidden in her hands, but her convulsive sobs had ceased, and she was evidently listening.

‘D’ye hear, Annie, d’ye hear?’ cried Job Endell excitedly. ‘Sakes alive, my gel! ain’t ye ready to jump out of your skin? You’re rich now, Annie-dromedy! Matt Watson has left you twenty thousand pounds! And me and the old woman ain’t forgotten neither! There’s a thousand golden sovereigns for *us*, my gel—ain’t there, sir, ain’t there?’

The lawyer nodded, glancing still at Annie and motioning Job to silence. There was a long pause, a troubled silence. At last, with a deep sigh, Annie uncovered her face and sat up in her chair, looking white and strange, more like one who had received tidings of some great calamity than the recipient of lucky news. Her dark eyes were dilated, her lips and throat were dry.

‘Tell me more, sir,’ she said faintly, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue. ‘I don’t seem rightly to understand. Matt Watson’s dead, you say, and has left me a heap o’ money? How’s that, sir? Where did he get so much to leave?’

‘I am informed,’ replied Letterstone, glancing again at the papers before him, ‘that your husband’ (again that curious gesture on the girl’s part as if to avert a blow) ‘left his ship at the Fiji Islands,

and made his way, like many others, to the gold-fields of Western America. For some time he was lost sight of, but he was among the first lucky discoverers of gold in the neighbourhood of San Francisco. From there, after acquiring large sums, he passed up the country towards Alaska, and again he was fortunate. The amount remitted to us is possibly only a portion of the wealth he had accumulated. Stricken down by illness, and in daily expectation of his death, he made his will in your favour and forwarded the twenty thousand pounds, to be paid to us to your credit. We still await the official certificate of his decease, but in any case, whether he is dead or living, we are instructed to pay over to his wife the sum I have named.'

'Then maybe he isn't dead at all!' cried Annie.
'Maybe——!'

'I am afraid,' said the lawyer, interrupting her gently, 'that I can hold out no hope of his survival. The words of the will are explicit. "I, Matthew Watson," he says, "being stricken down by mortal sickness, and having only a few hours to live, and being at this moment of sane mind," etc., etc. I have a copy of the document here which you can examine for yourself. Very shortly, no doubt, we shall receive full particulars of your husband's decease, and instructions con-

cerning the residue of his property, which I have no doubt is considerable. In the meantime I have again to congratulate you on the fact that your worldly wants are so fully provided for.'

The rest of that interview, as far as Annie was concerned, was like a troubled dream. The girl listened on, feeling neither glad nor sorry, but simply stupefied. The Vicar's kindly advice, Job Endell's boisterous congratulations, only bewildered her the more. She could not think, she scarcely seemed able to feel. All that she realized was that some extraordinary and mysterious change in her fortunes had occurred, at the very time when she had felt most hopelessly adrift. Only one dim light seemed visible to her in the midst of the darkness, and that light was the face of the Fairy Prince she had met on Canvey Island.

CHAPTER X.

THE BOHEMIANS.

RIGHT in the heart of Bloomsbury, and within a small bird's flutter from the gates of the British Museum, was the studio where William Bufton, dear to his comrades as 'Billy,' and as yet unknown to the fame which was to overtake him too late in life, worked late and early, whenever the Lord sent him Light, on pot-boilers for the picture-dealers, and masterpieces which no one would buy. He had two companions—young Somerset, to whom our reader has already been introduced (and who is, in fact, our hero, or our apology for one), and George Constable Leroy, artist, dramatist, and out-and-out Bohemian. Bufton was a born artist ; Somerset was an amateur with a certain amount of talent ; Leroy was a man of letters who was full of enthusiasm for art, but who painted execrably.

The three occupied the studio together, and the

two elder men slept there as well as worked, in a couple of dingy cupboards, which were dignified with the name of 'bedrooms.' Somerset had a room in the neighbourhood, whither he retired from time to time and slept.

But alas! Bohemia still existed in those days, and it was very much the fashion to lengthen (or as the result proved, to shorten) one's days 'by stealing a few hours from the night.' It was the period of pipes and beer, and midnight gatherings, and the Judge and Jury and Cremorne Gardens. Artists and literary men still affected the manners of the passing generation; they were generally hard up, careless in matters of raiment, free, not to say coarse spoken, and still freer of morals. They worked very hard, were paid very little, and spent the little they earned very recklessly. The three dwellers in the studio were no exception to this rule.

As for the studio itself, the approach to it was down a mews, and in all probability it had once been a portion of the neighbouring stables. It was a large glass-roofed chamber, with a good light from the north, and it was dining-room, drawing-room, room of all work, as well as studio. Littered about it were plaster casts, canvases, easels, lay figures, sketch-books, palettes, brushes, articles of apparel, pipes, empty bottles, flotsam

and jetsam of all kinds. The air, when the window was closed, smelt faintly of hay and manure. In one corner of the room was a raised platform for models, and close to that a rusty-looking stove, where the three cooked such meals as they partook of *en famille*. They generally dined out at some cheap restaurant in the neighbourhood of Tottenham Court Road; but their morning repasts of coffee and rolls were taken at home, and sometimes they supped in the studio, Leroy, who was a first-rate cook, preparing the repast. Servant they had none, if we except a certain middle-aged being, playfully known as the 'slavey,' who came in at stated intervals to clean and tidy the place, and who, being generally execrated and saluted with missiles if she dared to disarrange the artists' property and working materials, made her office as much a sinecure as possible.

One morning, late in the month of January, in the year succeeding the one when the two artists had visited Canvey Island, Bufton sat in the studio, busy on some blocks for the wood-engraver, on which he was working with the aid of a magnifying-glass fixed in his one available eye. He wore a velvet painting-jacket and loose pantaloons, and a Turkish fez was cocked upon his forehead. George Constable Leroy, a tall,

pale-faced man of about forty, blinking mildly through gold-rimmed spectacles—he was very short-sighted—was busy over the stove, warming the coffee for a late breakfast. His lips were clean-shaven, but he wore what were termed ‘mutton-chop’ whiskers. His thin form was wrapped in an old dressing-gown, covered with stains of paint and splashes of ink.

‘Charles is unusually late,’ soliloquized Leroy, bending over the coffee-pot, which he held in his hand.

‘Everyone hasn’t your head, Constable,’ returned Bufton. ‘The more you tiddle overnight, the livelier you seem in the morning.’

Leroy smiled, a feeble, good-humoured, watery smile, and then, going to a table set at a little distance from the stove, arranged two or three breakfast-cups, a milk-bowl, and a broken sugar-basin, and proceeded to pour out the coffee and to cut up two enormous loaves of French bread.

As he did so, he glanced across the studio to a large wooden easel, on which there stood an unfinished painting in the manner known as the ‘antique’—a nude female figure chained to a rock in the moonlight.

‘He was getting on very well with that picture,’ he said thoughtfully ; ‘he hasn’t touched it, however, for at least a month.’

‘Shows his sense,’ growled the cynic. ‘The next wisest thing he could do would be to chop it up to light the fire. Why, just look at the thing! It’s about as like an Andromeda, or anything else human, as I’m like Shakespeare.’

‘The human figure is so difficult,’ murmured Leroy.

‘Of course it is,’ returned Bufton, rising and walking over to the breakfast-table. ‘No Englishman since Etty has ever got within a hundred miles of it, and Etty’s things are glorified cows, not women. Yet this youngster thinks he can paint an Andromeda, as he calls it, all out of his own head, without even a decent model! Hang his impudence!’

So saying, Bufton sat down and began vigorously discussing the coffee and the French bread. His companion sat down opposite to him, poured himself out a cup of coffee, but ate nothing.

‘Hot coppers, Constable?’ demanded Bufton, with a grin.

‘No, Billy, no; only I’ve no appetite so early in the day. I’ve been thinking, you know, that Charles has not been quite himself lately. That experience down on the Thames has touched him more sharply than you suspected. Eh? Don’t you think so?’

his Bufton shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t think about it,’ he answered ; ‘but it’s not him I’m sorry for. He spooned the girl shamefully, and left her almost broken-hearted. If I hadn’t got him away in time, there would have been trouble.’

‘A fisherman’s daughter?’

‘Something of that sort. A little beauty, with all the airs and graces of a lady. What right had the youngster to go fooling over her, knowing as he did that it could come to nothing? Selfish young monkey! I had to talk to him like a father, I can tell you. Lucky I was there!’

Leroy blinked gently across the table and heaved a heavy sigh.

‘I sometimes think, Billy——’

Here he paused, sighed again, and took a large draught of hot coffee.

‘Well, what do you think?’ Bufton demanded.

‘I sometimes think that these things ought to be left alone, to be worked out, for good or evil, by the persons chiefly concerned. Take my case, Billy. Fifteen years ago I was in love, madly, desperately in love, with a girl far below me in social station—for I was a bit of a swell then, and my people thought I ought to look high up for a suitable wife. Well, they interfered, they worried my life out, till at last they succeeded in separating us. I’ve never married, and she, poor

dear! she married an infernal tradesman and died of a broken heart last summer.'

'*Après ?*' growled Bufton, who did not fail to notice that the other's voice was broken and his spectacles dim with tears.

'*Après*, Billy, both our lives were wasted, while, on the other hand, if our kind friends hadn't interfered, it might have been so different. She was too good for me, I admit, and perhaps—perhaps I shouldn't have made her happy; but, at any rate, I should have tried, and she, in her turn, might have made me a different man.'

He took another gulp of hot coffee, and blinked pathetically.

'The cases are not parallel,' observed Bufton. 'Charles is engaged to be married.'

'Quite so,' answered Leroy. 'I am afraid, however, that his mother, not himself, has done the courting in that quarter. His cousin is a very nice girl, I admit; but he seems in no hurry to marry her.'

'Of course not. He can't keep himself, let alone a wife. Well, what's the matter now, you precious old sentimentalist?'

The last question was provoked by a loud exclamation from Leroy, who set down his cup with a clatter, and rose quickly to his feet. His

mild face was flushed and excited, his whole demeanour agitated.

‘In matters of true love, Billy,’ he cried, ‘I protest against worldly interference. I return to my first position and assert, without any fear of contradiction, that young lovers should be let alone. I am, as you suggest, a sentimentalist, and my sentiment is that it is better to go wrong at the dictates of the affections than to go right through worldly calculation. Yes—a thousand times, yes!’

‘I see,’ returned Bufton, with a sneer. ‘So in your opinion I ought to have let the youngster play the gay Lothario to the bitter end? I ought to have stood by quietly and suffered him to lie, and lie, and lie, on the principle that true love, as you call it, ought to have its fling? Rot, Constable, rot! Love’s a myth, and generally another name for infernal selfishness. If I had the stage managing of this planet, I’d make it a criminal offence for men under forty to make love at all.’

Leroy smiled.

‘It would be very nice for old fogies like you and me, Billy,’ he said, ‘but a very bad look-out for the fair sex. No, sir, youth is the time for love, and the world can’t have too much of it.’

‘Oh, bosh!’ interrupted Bufton, with a mocking

laugh. 'You know as much about the world and about real men and women as I do about Sanscrit. *Quantum sufficit!* How's the play shaping?'

The allusion was to a new piece by Leroy, which was just then in rehearsal at one of the theatres in the Strand—a poetical piece in which the new tragedian, Mr. Eugene Aram, had a leading part. It was Leroy's first attempt at this kind of play. Hitherto he had confined his efforts to shorter pieces of modern character, for which he had been wretchedly paid, the palmy days of dramatic authorship not having yet arrived.

'It's shaping splendidly,' answered Leroy. 'Aram will be immense as Earl Tancred.'

'Aram would be an excellent actor,' returned the cynic, 'if he could but walk the stage and articulate the English language. His elocution is a caution, and his legs are a nightmare.'

'He is a genius, Billy,' cried the dramatist, 'and, mark my words, the world will one day acknowledge it. In the scene where he finds Paolo and Francesca together, and stabs them without a word, he is absolutely Dantesque.'

Just then the outer door of the studio was flung open, and in ran, rather than walked, the youngest member of the artistic trio. He was elegantly dressed in the fashion of the period—a somewhat

high-waisted coat, peg-top trousers, patent leather boots, and tall hat. His face was flushed, and his whole manner betokened unusual excitement.

With a nod to the pair he passed across the studio, turned on his heel, and finally, without a word, sank into a large rocking-chair in front of the unfinished canvas which Bufton had just been criticising so severely. Then, with his hat poised on the back of his head, he sat silent, regarding the unfinished form of his creation.

‘Who’s the swell?’ cried Bufton mockingly.
‘What is he doing in our poor diggings?’

Without even looking round, Somerset heaved a deep sigh, and murmured something in an undertone to himself.

‘I can understand his feelings,’ continued Bufton.
‘A picture like that would make a cat sigh, and a saint swear. Bear up, young man; it’s only a nightmare!’

In a moment Somerset swung round in the chair, and faced his friends.

‘Go ahead, Billy, chaff away! Your chaff reminds me, at any rate, that I’m awake, not dreaming.’

‘Anything the matter?’ inquired Leroy gently.

The young man shook his head, and gave vent to a curious laugh.

‘Oh, nothing—at least, nothing unusual. I’m

haunted—that's all!' He rose to his feet, and pointed to the figure on the canvas. 'You see that face?'

'We do,' cried Bufton pitilessly, 'and no one who has seen it is likely to forget it!'

'Laugh away, Billy, laugh away,' said Somerset. 'I know as well as you do that it's about as like the original as a plaster Italian cast is like the Venus in the Louvre; but for all that, it recalls the face of the real woman—at least, to me. Well, until quite recently I thought there was only one such face in the world—only one face with such eyes, and such a divine mouth. Well, either I'm going crazy or I'm mistaken. I saw that very face the other night at the theatre, and this morning by broad daylight I have seen it again.'

Bufton shrugged his shoulders.

'I dare say,' he observed. 'Nature is economical, and turns out her masterpieces in moulds. I've often observed the torso of Cleopatra on the body of the Italian organ-girls, and even in Italy living copies of Raphael's "Fornarina" are as thick as gooseberries.'

'But I tell you, Billy,' said Somerset, striding over to the breakfast-table, and looking down at his tormentor, 'that I've seen her very living self! You remember her—Andromeda, the maid of Canvey Island?'

‘I’m not likely to forget her so long as you continue to libel her on canvas. Sit down and have some coffee, unless you’ve breakfasted already.’

The young man threw himself into a chair, and, placing his elbows on the table and resting his chin in his hands, looked thoughtfully at Bufton. Leroy, in the meantime, poured him out a cup of coffee, with a look indicative of kindly sympathy.

‘If I didn’t know that it was impossible,’ said Somerset, ‘I’d swear that she was here in London.’

‘Perhaps she may be,’ suggested Leroy.

‘No, no, Constable, it can’t be. The girl I knew belonged to poor people, and dressed like a country maiden. The girl I’ve seen here in London is a lady, who wears silk and jewels, and drives about in her own carriage.’

‘And she resembles so closely the young maiden you call Andromeda?’ asked Leroy.

‘Resembles her? By George, Constable, she *is* Andromeda! Don’t I know every glint of her glorious black eyes, every expression of her wonderful face? If she isn’t Andromeda, she is her very living image. You remember that night, about a fortnight ago, when we went to see Robson at the Olympic? You left me just before they began the burlesque, and went on to the club. Well, I stayed on to the end; and just as I rose to go, and was glancing up at the

dress-circle, I saw the face I knew, smiling and beaming in the distance. I recognised it in a moment, and you could have knocked me down with a feather. There was an awful crush to get out, and the way was blocked with people, so that it was over ten minutes before I could reach the box-lobby of the theatre. When I did so, I caught a glimpse of her again, gorgeously dressed, bare-headed, with an opera-cloak on her shoulders, stepping into a brougham. In another instant she was gone.'

'I understand,' said Leroy ; ' that's why you've been so queer and absent-minded lately.'

'I suppose so. Try all I could, I couldn't get the vision out of my mind. Sleeping or waking, Constable, I've been haunted by it. Well, that's not all. The queerest part of all has yet to be told.'

'Tell it to the marines, youngster!' interposed Bufton, rising and returning to the wood block on which he had previously been working. 'I've got to get to work.'

Then, fixing a magnifying glass into his eye, he proceeded with his sketch, pricking up his ears, nevertheless, to hear the conclusion of the narrative, which Somerset was eagerly confiding to Leroy.

'This morning I had just been to call on my mother, and was strolling along here, when I saw

at the corner of Bloomsbury Square a carriage rapidly approaching. Though there was snow on the ground, and more going to fall, the carriage was open, and seated in it, wrapped up in furs and sealskins, was my Andromeda, or her double. I stopped short on the pavement as if I had been shot. Our eyes met, and then—you may believe me or believe me not—she seemed to recognise me—she did, by Jove!—for she started on her seat, and flushed as red as a rose. In another instant, as before, she was gone. I tried to follow the carriage, but it disappeared in the traffic—and, so far as I could see, she didn't even look back.'

There was a long pause, during which Somerset strolled to a side-table, found a briar-pipe, filled it with tobacco, and began to smoke, glancing ever and again questioningly at Bufton and Leroy. It was clear that he was greatly perplexed and agitated, and anxious to hear their opinion on the subject which he had opened.

'It's very singular,' observed Leroy at last. 'Of course, it cannot be the same person.'

'How can it be?' cried Somerset. 'My Andromeda was a poor girl, and this is an out-and-out swell. But why should she start and seem to know me? That's the puzzle!'

'Perhaps,' Leroy suggested, 'she was struck by

your look of amazed recognition, and may have fancied for a moment that you were an acquaintance.'

'That may account for it,' muttered Somerset dubiously. 'On the other hand, the likeness is simply wonderful. It's not merely the contour of the face, the shape of the figure, the colour of the eyes and hair—it's the expression, the look in the eyes, the whole appearance. If this isn't Andromeda, Andromeda has a twin sister!'

Buften looked up from his work with a cynical gleam in his Cyclopean eye.

'In which case, I suppose, you're in love with both of 'em? Well, the swell for choice; I advise you to hunt her up.'

Somerset seized a cushion from a chair, and hurled it at the cynic's head, just missing it, as he replied :

'You're a soulless beast, Billy! All the same, I'm determined to get to the heart of the mystery. In the meantime, I'll have another go at my picture.'

So saying, he stripped off his walking-coat and waistcoat, put on a painting-jacket of brown holland, and set to work.

CHAPTER XI.

A FIRST NIGHT.

THE winds blew somewhat chill that winter in Bohemia. All the three were hard up, for Somerset was too proud and independent to accept much help from his widowed mother, whose means, though sufficient for her own purpose, were strictly limited.

As for Bufton, he was at once so badly paid and so liberal-handed that he was generally behindhand financially, and the same remark applied to Leroy, who no sooner received money than he distributed it broadcast among all the needy ones of his acquaintance.

A golden prospect, nevertheless, seemed to be opening up for Leroy. He had received a certain sum on account of the purchase-money of the new play which was then in rehearsal, and he was to be paid a further and much larger amount if the

piece turned out to be a success. It was very unusual in those days of the early sixties for dramatic authors to be paid as they are paid nowadays—in proportion to the receipts taken at the theatre doors. The famous Mr. Tom Taylor, the leading dramatist of the day, was content to accept one hundred pounds an act as the entire purchase-money of an original play, and fifty pounds an act for a piece adapted (like many of his successful works) from the French. For the ‘Ticket-of-Leave Man,’ an admirable work, to all intents and purposes original, he only received about a couple of hundred pounds.

Literary men and artists, in fact, were still Bohemians—that is to say, they lived on the fringe of good society, and were wretchedly paid for their labours. Now, of course, all that has changed, and artists as well as authors, when successful, wear purple and fine linen. In the early sixties Bohemia was still Bohemia, and even successful *littérateurs* and painters were all Bohemian, more or less.

Living as they did together, with much the same aims and aspirations, the three might be said to possess one common purse, which was open to each alike. No one of them ever wanted money if either of them happened to be in funds. Luckily or unluckily, as the case might be, all three were

equally improvident and indifferent to personal gain. When they earned money, they spent it or gave it away in the lordliest fashion, and when they were hard up, as was generally the case, they dined cheerfully 'with Duke Humphrey,' and never bewailed their condition.

All three were now looking forward with almost equal interest to the production of the drama which was to make, they hoped, the fortune of Leroy. Nor was their interest entirely selfish, for in their hearts they were deeply attached to each other, and Leroy's success would bring abundant satisfaction to both his comrades. As the great day drew near their excitement increased, and was expressed in each case characteristically—by Somerset with the utmost enthusiasm and admiration for his friend's work, by Bufton with cynical chaff that entirely failed to hide an underlying tenderness and sympathy, and by Leroy himself with modest confidence in the merit of his own creation.

The bills were out, and all the advertisements were in the newspapers. 'Francesca dei Rimini, a new poetical play, by George Constable Leroy,' was posted all over the walls of London. At last the great day dawned, and the friends prepared to go to the theatre together.

There were difficulties. Somerset, always a bit

of a dandy, was all right in the way of wardrobe, but neither Bufton nor Leroy was quite as fortunate. Bufton, however, purchased a second-hand frock-coat for the occasion, while Leroy hired a dress-suit from a Jewish clothier, who supplied wardrobes of all sorts to the leading theatres.

Too modest to ask for stalls, Leroy had secured three excellent seats in an obscure position at the back of the dress-circle, and thither, on the eventful evening, he repaired with his friends. The theatre was crowded, and scattered here and there among the audience were friendly Bohemians, who idolized Leroy and had had countless occasions to remember his goodness.

Pity the sorrows of the poor dramatist! Panting, perspiring, poor Leroy sat and trembled as the overture began and the critics of the great newspapers began to gather in the stalls.

Suddenly his arm was clutched, and turning, with a start of terror, he saw Somerset gazing wildly towards a private box on the dress-circle.

'What's the matter?' murmured Leroy. 'For Heaven's sake don't make me more nervous than I am already!'

But Somerset, leaning forward, addressed Bufton, who was seated on the other side of Leroy.

'Look there!' he said. 'Look there, Billy, and then tell me again that I was dreaming.'

Buften gazed towards the private box, and saw, to his amazement, leaning forward from the box, and looking round at the crowded house, the face of the maid of Canvey Island !

Yes, there could be no mistake whatever. It was either Andromeda, or (as Somerset had averred) her living image. But although the face was the same, with its one unmistakable peculiarity, that of the dark powerfully-pencilled eyebrows which nearly met across the forehead, it seemed transformed and idealized.

The girl, whoever she was, wore an evening dress of white silk, cut very low, and revealing shoulders white as alabaster, and white ostrich feathers in her hair attached by a diamond brooch, and on her neck and throat there were more diamonds, sparkling in the gaslight. Her beautifully moulded arms were bare like her neck and shoulders, but on her hands she wore long gloves, and held a large fan of ostrich feathers.

Seated with her in the box were two persons—a pale, delicate-looking girl somewhat plainly dressed, and an elderly lady gorgeously attired in black.

The overture was proceeding, and the theatre was full of the rustling murmur of the large audience. The girl's face looked radiant with delight in the glory of its youthful beauty.

‘My God!’ murmured Somerset; ‘am I drunk or dreaming? It must be herself! Who else can it be?’

‘Wonderfully like, no doubt,’ said Bufton; ‘but one can see at a glance that this girl’s a lady.’

‘So was she!’ cried Somerset impatiently—‘a lady in heart and soul, at any rate. Look how she’s smiling. As if I could forget that smile!’

‘Sh! sh!’ murmured through the audience as the curtain rose on the first act of Leroy’s drama. The girl turned towards the stage and settled herself in her seat, only leaving visible the back of her head and the gleam of one ivory shoulder, on which Somerset feasted eagerly without once turning his eyes to the stage. What cared he now for the play—for all the plays in the world! All he looked and waited for now was another glimpse of his mysterious ideal.

Loud cheers and applause. Enter Eugene Aram as my lord of Rimini—a dark, sinister, hunch-backed figure, with a strangely fascinating smile. As the dialogue went on the interest of the piece deepened, and when the drop fell on the first act the applause was both loud and spontaneous.

‘It’s going all right,’ said Bufton, which was rare approval, coming from him. Leroy turned to Somerset, but his seat was vacant; he had disappeared.

The two men left the dress-circle, and made their way to the refreshment-room, which was crowded to suffocation. Everyone was talking, and here and there a cocksure critic was laying down the law. From time to time they exchanged a nod and a greeting with some friend from Bohemia, and at last, after a long struggle, they succeeded in procuring some whisky-and-soda.

The bell rang, and they returned to their seats, but there was no sign of Somerset.

'Where can he have gone to?' murmured Leroy plaintively. 'I'm afraid he'll miss the second act.'

'Much he cares about that!' was Bufton's response.

At that moment the young man joined them, looking very pale and worried.

'Forgive me, old fellow,' he said to Leroy, 'I've been making inquiries at the box-office; she's in Box C, and Box C has been let to a Mrs. Watson. That's all I can learn; they won't give me any address or other information.'

'I suppose Mrs. Watson is the old lady,' returned Leroy, whose thoughts, however, were concentrated on the play.

The act-drop rose again, and the attention of everybody except Somerset was fixed upon the stage. From that time forward the play was a

succession of triumphs for the author and the leading actor. Mr. Eugene Aram surpassed all anticipations, even those of his most sanguine admirers. His representation of a sardonic yet impressionable creature, driven to madness by love and jealousy, was pronounced masterly, and the end of the play, when Earl Tancred deliberately kills his wife and her paramour, and ends by destroying himself with his own hand, produced an outburst of the wildest enthusiasm.

Almost before he could realize what was taking place, the happy dramatist found himself swept away by a perfect torrent of friendly congratulations ; eager hands grasped his, friends and even strangers felicitated him, and finally, borne round through the pass-door on to the stage, he was led on by the manager of the theatre to make his bow before the applauding public.

Buften, as well as Somerset, had long since disappeared. Trembling with delight, Leroy made his way to the leading actor's dressing-room, and found Aram, still clothed in his war-paint, stretched upon a sofa, and gasping with fatigue. The manager, the acting-manager, and a group of friends from the front were congratulating him volubly ; but when the dramatist entered, flushing timidly, Aram cried :

‘ There’s the real hero of the evening ! Leroy,

old man, I think you've got home this time! Birchington, give Leroy a brandy-and-soda.'

Birchington was the actor's dresser, and was busily engaged just then handing round drinks and cigars to the company assembled.

A little later Leroy went round to the Bohemian Club, of which he was a familiar member, and here, too, the chorus of praise was in full voice. Actors from the various theatres, critics of the minor newspapers, divers hangers-on of the theatrical and literary professions, were all full of the new play, and eager to hob-nob with the distinguished dramatist. As a natural result, poor Leroy, who had only one weakness, which he shared with too many able men of that generation, was soon half tipsy.

It was an hour past midnight, and most of the early birds had gone home to roost, when Somerset, flushed with excitement, entered the club, and, after an eager search, found his friend alone, and half asleep, in the smoking-room.

'Forgive me again, old fellow!' he cried, wringing Leroy's hand. 'I hear on every hand that it's a success, an immense success, and I can't tell you how glad I am—how awfully glad. I met old Cackleford of the *Times* on the doorstep, and he's simply raving.'

'He told me to my face, Charles,' said Leroy,

with a tipsy hiccup, 'that I'm a gr—great dramatist. But the success isn't mine, dear boy—it's Aram's. He was simply wonderful!'

'Your play gave him his opportunity. Without the play he could have done nothing.'

Leroy smiled with feeble self-satisfaction.

'Quite right, Charles—quite right! But where have you been all this time?' he demanded; 'and how's Mrs.—Mrs. Andromeda?'

Somerset saw that the dramatist was too elated, both mentally and spiritually, to be a fit recipient of amorous confidences, so he simply wrung his friend's hand again, and said, with a nervous laugh:

'Oh, Andromeda's all right, old fellow. I'll tell you all about that in the morning.'

* * * * *

It was twelve o'clock next day before Leroy rose from his bed, made a hasty toilette, and hastened into the studio, where he found Bufton hard at work.

'It's all right, Constable,' said Bufton, pointing to a pile of newspapers; 'all the idiots on the papers are cracking up the play and Aram, except the man on the *Morning Planet*, who says that the play is a crib from the Italian, and that the actor, as usual, was inarticulate.'

Poor Leroy, whose head ached terribly from the

excesses of the previous evening, and who looked the picture of misery, sank into a chair and held his hand to his forehead.

‘What time did you get home, Billy?’

‘Oh, I was snug between the blankets by half-past twelve,’ was the reply. ‘I knew you’d be keeping it up, so I trotted home. I heard you come in with the milk.’

‘It was really too much excitement,’ sighed the dramatist.

‘You mean too much champagne and brandy.’

‘And the excitement, too, Billy. I really couldn’t stand it very often. Well, thank goodness it’s all over.’

Half an hour later Somerset entered the studio, looking spick and span as usual. His face, however, was very pale, and his manner strangely subdued. After again congratulating Leroy on his success, he seemed to fall into a brown study, from which he was aroused by the voice of Bufton saying :

‘Well, what about your Andromeda? Did you ascertain anything about her?’

The young man looked quietly up and nodded. His expression was so curious, his manner so peculiar, that his friends saw clearly that something unusual had occurred.

After waiting some minutes for him to speak,

Buften said again, with a slight sneer: 'Well who was right, youngster?'

'I was,' replied Somerset. 'I knew that such an extraordinary likeness between two human creatures was impossible.' He paused, and then added very quickly, almost sadly: 'The girl we saw last night was our Andromeda—the girl we met on Canvey Island.'

'Nonsense!' cried Buften, genuinely astonished.

'It's no nonsense, but the fact. I've seen her face to face—I've spoken to her. She has come into a fortune—large or small, I don't know which—and she's living here in London.'

It was Buften's turn to look troubled, for he had assumed all along that the person he had seen in the theatre, in spite of her resemblance to the maid of Canvey, was a stranger. He gave a prolonged whistle, got up from his work, and strode across the room.

'Did you follow her home?' he demanded, suddenly wheeling round and facing Somerset, who sat looking quite miserable and dejected.

'I'd no need to do that,' the young man answered gloomily. 'I met her face to face in the lobby of the theatre, and she gave me her hand with the air of a duchess! I was so staggered that I could hardly get out a syllable. "I'm living in London now," she said, "and that

is my address. Any afternoon you are disengaged we shall be very pleased to see you." Then she took out a card and gave it to me—and—and—then she went away. I was never more astonished in my life.'

'Well,' said Bufton, 'the mystery is at any rate explained ; so what are you looking so glumpy about !'

'Nothing,' returned Somerset, 'only—only——' He paused, drew out a piece of pasteboard from his pocket, and tossed it to Bufton, saying : 'There's the card she gave me ; you can look at it.'

Bufton took the card, screwed up his one available eye to examine it, and read as follows :

MRS. ANNIE WATSON,
Tenterden's Hotel,
Hart Street, Bloomsbury.

'By the Lord Harry!' cried Bufton, 'then she's a married woman !'

CHAPTER XII.

AT TENTERDEN'S HOTEL.

AT the very moment when the friends were staring in wonder at the card which bore her name and address, Annie herself was seated, not a quarter of a mile away, in a prettily-furnished private sitting-room on the second floor of Tenterden's Hotel. She wore an elegant *peignoir*, which could only have been manufactured by a fashionable dress-maker, and was languidly reclining in an armchair close to the window of the apartment. Near to her, in another chair, sat Bess Lawrence, the dress-maker of Rayleigh, also very nicely dressed, looking anxiously at her companion. For Annie's face was clouded, and her black eyebrows met ominously, as she gazed out on the gloomy street, where the wintry snow was falling. Her little feet tapped the ground impatiently, and from time to time she uttered an angry exclamation.

‘But why worry yourself about it, Annie?’ said Bess gently. ‘Of course, you only did what was right. After all, he was bound to know.’

‘He wasn’t!’ cried Annie. ‘We might never have met at all. And then—and then——’

‘But you wanted so much to meet him, didn’t you?’

‘Of course I did, but somehow when we came face to face I felt angry with him, with myself, with the whole world. Then, like a fool, I handed him my card. Oh, what will he think of me? What will he think of me?’

She sprang to her feet and paced up and down the room.

‘But,’ murmured Bess, ‘didn’t you explain?’

‘Of course I didn’t,’ cried Annie. ‘I was too startled and ashamed. All I did was to ask him to call. If he does, I won’t see him! But there, I dare say he won’t take the trouble.’

‘Perhaps not, dear,’ said Bess, ‘for if you didn’t explain, he may fancy that you’ve got married since you last saw him, and are living here with your husband.’

Annie uttered an exclamation. Such a contingency as her friend described had not even occurred to her.

‘Worse and worse!’ she exclaimed. ‘I never thought of that. Of course, when he reads my

name, "Mrs. Annie Watson," he'll never think for one moment that I'm a—a widow!" She gulped out the word with a wry face, and then continued: 'But there, anything is better than that he should know the truth. If he ever did know it, I think I should die of shame.'

'But you've nothing whatever to be ashamed of, Annie. Although you were married when only a child——'

'Don't speak of it! don't speak of it!' Annie exclaimed, her dark eyes flashing and her lips trembling. 'When I look back, I feel as if I should go mad. Often and often when I think of it I hate myself for having taken that money. And after all, what has it brought me? Misery—only misery! I was happy down there in Canvey. I'm sick of being here in London and trying to be a lady!'

Bess smiled, for she remembered well how ill at ease Annie had been latterly in her wild surroundings, and how, at the very moment when fortune came to her, she had been planning to escape to the great city.

At that moment there was a sharp tap at the door. In a moment Annie's manner changed, and she put her finger on her lips.

'It's Mrs. Garthorne,' she whispered quickly. 'Don't say a word of this to her.'

The door opened and an elderly lady of large proportions, attired in a dress of black silk, on the ample breast of which was a gold chain, sailed into the room. She was the same individual who had sat with Annie in the box on the previous evening.

‘Good-morning, my child,’ she said, smiling and kissing Annie coldly on the forehead. ‘I would not disturb you before, although you did not come down to breakfast. How do you feel, dear, after the excitement of last evening?’

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ returned Annie carelessly.

Mrs. Garthorne sank into a chair and arranged her rustling silk skirts with her white hands, on which were massive gold rings.

‘Had I known the play was to be so tiresome, I should certainly not have suggested your taking a box for the first night; but on such an occasion, love, one sees all the smart people, all the clever people, and I thought that would interest you.’

‘I liked the play very much,’ said Annie. ‘So did Bess. It made us both cry.’

Mrs. Garthorne glanced somewhat patronizingly at Bess, in whose opinions, it was clear, she took but little interest.

‘I do not approve of pieces of that sort,’ she proceeded, with an air of authority. ‘They are

unreal; they lead to false conceptions of the world in which we live. Some of the expressions they contain, moreover, are in very bad taste. The name of the Deity was again and again introduced with a most deplorable want of taste and reverence.'

With the advent of this mentor, Annie seemed to have recovered her good-humour. She looked with twinkling eyes at her little companion, and said with a clear laugh :

'Well, you see, Mrs. Garthorne, Bess and I haven't much experience of theatres. It all seemed so dreadfully true, and very interesting.'

The elder lady sighed, and thought it best not to pursue the subject.

'You noticed Lord Willington in the box opposite?' she said. 'The lady with him was his second wife, and the governess of his first wife's children. The family were very much shocked when he led her to the altar.'

'Indeed!'

'It was very natural, for it was certainly a *mésalliance*. Did you observe the tall, elegant-looking young man to whom I bowed after the second act? That was Sir Frederick Christchurch, who was one of my late husband's brother officers. I thought he would have come up to the box, in which case I would have introduced you; but I

presume that he could not leave the lady whom he was escorting.'

More conversation of this elegant kind followed, but to relate it would scarcely entertain the reader. We prefer to seize the occasion for a few words of necessary retrospection.

It was not until some time after she had received the news of her so-called good fortune that Annie realized the change it was bound to make in her worldly position. At first she had been simply stupefied. But when day by day the truth became clearer to her, she began to think more and more of her Fairy Prince, and to feel her old longing to follow him to London. At first old Mrs. Endell, who felt for her a really unselfish affection, tried to dissuade her from going away at all ; but every hour her longing grew to see something of the great world. At last, when all the preliminaries were settled and the large sum sent over was placed in her hands, she made up her mind to bid farewell to Canvey Island, at least for a time, and to reside in London.

After not a little consultation, she persuaded her friend the little dressmaker to be her companion. They arranged to take rooms in town and to join together in a round of innocent amusement and sight-seeing. When all was thus settled, the Vicar's eldest daughter gave them a

letter of introduction to the mistress of Tenterden's Hotel, a highly respectable boarding establishment in the then select region of Bloomsbury.

Conceive the change—wonderful as any change in a fairy tale! The wild maid of Canvey Island, a widow almost before she was a wife, found herself the mistress of some twenty thousand pounds, with a cheque-book, elegant rooms of her own, and carte-blanche to dress herself as she pleased, and to come and go as her fancy willed. In the course of a very few weeks Annie was positively transformed; and no one would have recognised in the graceful and elegantly-dressed young lady, who was the admiration of all the men at Tenterden's, the wild young girl who had spent so many years amid almost savage surroundings on Canvey Island.

Annie's instincts, however, had always been refined, and she had been fortunate enough to come under the influence of the young ladies of the Vicarage. The companion she had chosen, moreover, was a girl of great sense and discretion, and with no coarse propensities or sympathies. To her advice and influence was due the fact that Annie, although she had a true feminine love for dress, which she did not fail to gratify now she had the means, avoided all vulgarities, and clothed herself with both taste and judgment. Her

manners, always refined, were now carefully and diligently corrected, and if by an occasional solecism of speech she now and then betrayed her lack of education, she was too much mistress of herself to do so very often.

She was assisted, moreover, in her secret ambition to look and act like a lady by a fellow-boarder to whom she was introduced very early during her stay at Tenterden's. This was Mrs. Major Garthorne, with whom the reader is already acquainted, and who was the widow of an officer who had died abroad, leaving her a small annuity. Mrs. Garthorne, who speedily gathered something of Annie's story from the gossip of the boarding-house table, soon contrived to ingratiate herself with the young stranger, and having completely won her confidence, proceeded to make herself useful, even necessary, as a friendly guide and mentor. Annie, whose judgment was very keen, did not fail to perceive that the officer's widow was a somewhat selfish and worldly woman, but her very worldliness and worldly folly amused and interested one who had had little or no social experience. So it came to pass that Mrs. Garthorne became, on a tacit understanding that her services might be recompensed later on, a sort of informal chaperon to the friendless girls.

Such was the position of affairs when Annie

encountered at the theatre the young man who had contrived to awaken the first passion of her life. Day and night she had been thinking and dreaming about him, hoping, yet dreading, that they might meet; and once before, as we know, she had caught a glimpse of him in the streets. That one glimpse had been enough to cause her infinite suspense and agitation. Wherever she went, in private or in public, her eyes had searched for the one familiar form, and always in vain. To Bess, and to Bess only, she confided her fears and her yearnings, when Mrs. Garthorne was sleeping the sleep of virtue, and the two girls were left alone.

The guests or boarders at Tenterden's were exceedingly select, consisting for the most part of well-known people who had come down in the world and found it necessary to practise rigid economy. There were one or two retired officers, several officers' wives and widows, a few American families, and one or two young civilians. Tenterden himself was a mild, unassuming person, who held some obscure Government appointment, and Mrs. Tenterden, who always presided at the head of the table, was a stately person of most aristocratic manners. Nothing low or vulgar was countenanced at Tenterden's. The meals were served solemnly by men-servants, always of German

nationality, and after dinner there was music and whist in the drawing-room.

Poor as the social environment might have seemed to one brought up in luxury, to Annie it was quite delightful. She felt, as it were, in the very odour of sanctity, and she loved the quiet ways and refined manners of the persons to whom she was introduced. Naturally enough she was soon regarded as the belle, or beauty, of the establishment. The men surrounded her like a small court, and even the sourest spinster treated her with civility, having heard whispers of her wealth.

Under the guidance of Mrs. Garthorne, she made several acquaintances outside the establishment, and was invited to one or two quiet balls and evening parties, chiefly in Bayswater and the suburbs. On these occasions, as at theatres and concerts, she enjoyed herself immensely, and her bold, uncommon beauty, her grace and simplicity, were the theme of general admiration.

Nor was she content to remain as she was without making any effort at self-improvement. A young Parisian lady who was boarding at the house gave her lessons in French, and twice a week, accompanied by Bess, she went to the Portland Rooms, close to Cavendish Square, where the two girls were instructed privately in all the

fashionable dances. The result of all this was speedily seen. Always exquisitely graceful, Annie became easy and at home in any company, so that few, looking at her and hearing her speak, would have suspected her lowly origin.

The wonder among all who saw her and were introduced to her was that she, still so young a girl in appearance, had already been married, and was now actually a widow. This was indeed a mystery which no one could fathom ; but as she herself vouchsafed no information, and as the only person altogether in her confidence discreetly held her tongue, a mystery it remained.

Since being informed by the Gravesend solicitor of the large amount sent over for her disposal, she had also received from the same source information of her husband's death. Their agents in San Francisco reported that Matt Watson had died of fever, up country, leaving behind him considerable property, concerning which they were making careful inquiries. They suggested, indeed, that Annie should come out forthwith to America, with the view of making her claim good to the rest of her inheritance. This, however, she absolutely declined to do—at least, on the spur of the moment. She would wait for further communications, and then decide.

To Bess alone she confided her true feelings—

the curious dread and repulsion which had grown up in her heart towards the man who had been her benefactor, and the hesitation she felt in consequence at accepting his legacy.

‘It’s just like a horrid dream,’ she said, ‘my being married at all. He was more like my father than a man I could care for in that way; and even now, though it isn’t a long time since I saw him, I don’t seem to remember him rightly. All I see is a strange face with a great beard, and big earrings in his ears, and big hands with tattoo marks all over them. I was sick whenever he touched me, and downright glad when he went away.’

‘He must have been very fond of you, Annie,’ said the little dressmaker.

‘I suppose he was,’ answered Annie thoughtfully, ‘and when I was a little child I was very fond of *him*. It wasn’t till he began to make love to me that I felt afraid of him. He’d sit and look at me for hours with his face smiling and his white teeth gleaming, and though he never said a word about it, I knew what was in his mind, though I was too young to understand it altogether. Then, before he went away, they wanted me to marry him, and at first I was afraid, but at last I thought it only a bit of fun.’

The dark line gathered over her forehead, and

her face was full of shrinking dread, as she continued :

‘After he was gone I tried to forget all about him, and as the time passed on I began to feel as if he’d gone away for ever. I kept my own name, and no one knew on Canvey that I’d been married ; for Mrs. Endell always said it was only a sort of form of marriage, and that if Matt returned we’d maybe go through it again. When I thought of that I prayed and prayed that he’d never return at all.’

‘After all,’ suggested Bess, ‘it’s been for the best. If you hadn’t married him, he might never have left you all that money.’

‘It would have been better, perhaps, if he hadn’t. I shouldn’t be so sick and ashamed. It’s bad to feel as I feel about him, for he was always very good to me, and it doesn’t seem fair to take his money, and be glad that he’s dead and buried. Sometimes I wake at night and fancy that he isn’t dead, but coming back. If he ever did, I think that I should die of fear.’

‘Well, there’s no chance of that,’ returned Bess. ‘The lawyers say, don’t they, that he died directly after sending the money and making his will?’

‘Yes, that’s so,’ answered Annie, ‘but somehow or other I can’t get it into my heart that he’s dead

and gone. He was so big and strong, so full of life, and his comings and goings were always so strange. He'd be here in England one day and gone the next; and then, when months and months had gone by, and it would seem as if he was never coming back, in he'd walk at the door laughing, his hands full of queer things from over seas. He was a strange man, Bess, and I always felt uneasy with him, and I feel now as if he was waiting in hiding somewhere—waiting to spring out on me.'

Fortunately for Annie, the feelings thus graphically described only represented a passing mood. She was too young and high-spirited to yield altogether to nervous fancies, and before long she had ceased to distress herself about the man who, she was confidently assured, had died over seas. With the assurance that he had passed out of her life for ever came a gentler recollection of his many kindnesses and his lifelong devotion. She tried to think of him as of a rough parent and guardian, and melted towards him accordingly, full of gentle gratitude for the crowning service which he had done for her.

On the same day following her meeting with Somerset at the theatre Annie lunched downstairs at Tenterden's, and after lunch Mrs. Garthorne proposed that they should drive out for a couple

of hours in the park ; for, acting under her chaperon's advice, Annie had made arrangements with the proprietor of a livery stable, who, for a fixed sum per week, placed a horse and carriage at her disposal. That afternoon, however, she elected to stay at home, and Mrs. Garthorne took the carriage to make a few ceremonious calls.

‘Why wouldn't you go out?’ asked Bess, as they returned to their private sitting-room upstairs. ‘The drive would have done you good.’

Annie gave a curious little laugh.

‘I don't know,’ she answered ; ‘I felt that I preferred to stay at home.’ Then, laughing again nervously, she added : ‘Well, if you must know the truth, I fancied that perhaps someone might call.’

‘But I thought that you had made up your mind not to see him?’

‘Yes, so I had,’ returned Annie ; ‘but I should like to know, for all that, whether he means to come. And, after all, why shouldn't I see him? What harm can it do?’

Bess looked dubious.

‘I suppose it can do no harm, only——’

‘Oh, he won't ask me any questions,’ said Annie lightly. ‘He'll only be curious to know how I come to be here, and whether I'm really a married

lady. It will be good fun to see how he takes it, won't it?'

She spoke eagerly and carelessly, but a troubled look on her face belied her words. Bess did not answer, but her face grew troubled too.

An hour passed. Bess sat at needlework, while Annie fidgeted about the room, now dropping into a chair and trying to read a book, again springing up and walking up and down, and again going to the window and gazing out on the dismal street.

The atmosphere was dark and dismal without, and snow was still falling.

'Of course,' Annie murmured, 'he's hardly likely to come in such weather.'

Bess sighed, then smiled quietly, and shook her head.

'What's the matter now?' demanded Annie.

'Nothing, dear, only I was thinking——'

'What were you thinking?'

'That perhaps you were right, and you'd better not meet again—only trouble can come of it. You told me that he was engaged to be married, and you—well, you're not free.'

'Not free?' cried Annie indignantly. 'I like that! Isn't Matt Watson dead and buried?'

'No doubt; but you can't prove it, dear, yet awhile.'

‘I don’t want to prove it,’ said Annie. ‘It’s not fair of you to talk as if I was running after Mr. Somerset, and wanting him to marry me. I like him, of course, but only as a friend. He was very kind to me when we met on Canvey, and, of course, I’m pleased to meet him again.’ Then, seeing that her friend looked still very dubious and quite unconvinced, she added quickly : ‘Well, then, I love him ; I worship the very ground he walks on ! Does that satisfy you ? I do, and I’m not ashamed to own it. I’d rather beg my bread with him than share all the riches of the earth with anyone else. If he lifted up his little finger and said “Come !” I’d follow him to the furthest end of the world. Yes, I love him ! I love him ! I love him !’

Her face shone, her eyes were full of fire.

‘Oh, Annie!’ murmured the little dressmaker.

“‘Oh, Annie!’ and “‘Oh, Annie!’” repeated the other mockingly. ‘It’s all very well to say that, and look shocked ; but you’ve never been in love. You don’t know how soft and kind his voice is, and how sweet his breath ! I tell you, I’d give away all my money, my life, everything, just to feel his arms round me for a few minutes, or to lie down at his feet and wait for a loving look and word. I’ve been waiting and waiting all these months only to see his face again, to hear

his voice. It's the only thing I care for, the only thing that makes me wish to live.'

As she spoke thus, panting out the words with flushed face and sparkling eyes, there was a tap at the door, and the man-servant entered, carrying a card on a salver.

'A gentleman to see you, madame,' said the man, in a strong German accent.

She started, trembled, and took up the card. Then her face went pale, but she forced a laugh, and waved the card to her companion. It bore the name of 'Charles Somerset.'

She glanced at Bess, who was looking at her with wondering eyes and open mouth. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she said, pressing her lips firmly together :

'Show the gentleman up.'

CHAPTER XIII.

AN AFTERNOON CALL.

THE moment the man-servant left the room Bess also made a movement towards the door, saying :

‘I’d better go ; you’d like to see him alone.’ And Annie offered no objection ; she felt, indeed, that the presence of even Bess would be irksome at such a time. When Somerset entered, hat in hand, a minute later he found Annie seated in an arm-chair near the window, with her eyes fixed upon a book which she held in her hand, and so well had she mastered her emotion that he did not notice that she was trembling, and that her face was unusually pale.

While he stood hesitating in wonder she rose, and held out her hand.

‘So you’ve come to see me after all,’ she said, smiling.

‘Did you think I would not ?’ was his reply.

He hardly knew what to say, he was so taken aback by her calm air of lady-like self-possession. It was so difficult to believe that she was the same person whom he had encountered among the wilds of Canvey.

There was an awkward pause, during which he continued to grasp her hand and to look wonderingly into her face. Her dark eyes met his quite fearlessly; then her face flushed slightly, and drawing her hand away, she motioned him to a chair. He sat down and stared.

‘How are they all at the island?’ he stammered. ‘How’s old Job, and dear old Mother Endell?’

‘Quite well, I believe,’ she answered, moving towards the window, and looking at him with her face in shadow. ‘They were all right, at any rate, when I last heard from them. I’ve been in London for some time.’

He was dying to question her concerning herself, but he had not the courage. He began, awkwardly enough, to tell her how astonished he had been when he first recognised her in the street, and how impossible it had seemed to him that she could be his former acquaintance. She listened to him quietly while he uttered the usual polite commonplaces of an ordinary caller; then, as he struggled more and more in the meshes of his embarrass-

ment, the humour of the situation seized her, and she broke into a peal of laughter, turning her face away. In an instant the spell was broken, and he sprang up with extended arms.

‘Annie!’ he said, ‘don’t laugh at me. Tell me what has happened. Tell me why it is that I find you here in London.’

Still laughing, she waved him back.

‘You must behave yourself,’ she said, ‘or I shall be sorry I invited you to call. London isn’t Canvey Island.’

‘More’s the pity!’ he exclaimed; ‘but the Annie I met at Canvey—the dear little girl I’ve so often thought of since—was the same Annie who met me last night at the theatre, and who told me, or at least conveyed to me, that she was married. Are you married? I can’t believe it possible!’

She laughed still, but very differently; her face had darkened, and there was the old angry flash in her eyes.

‘I wish you wouldn’t question me,’ she said. ‘Suppose I am married—what then? It doesn’t matter, does it?’ She added carelessly: ‘How’s your friend Mr. Bufton? As funny and cross as ever?’

Their eyes met, and he made another step towards her, but she sailed past him and crossed

the room ; then, turning on the hearthrug and gazing at him earnestly, she cried :

‘ Suppose I ask you the same question, Mr. Somerset? Are you married yet? You know you told me you were going to be—to your cousin, wasn’t it?’

‘ Oh, I’m still a bachelor,’ he replied, ‘ and likely to remain so. Much too hard up to think of matrimony, even if my fancy turned that way. You see, Annie, I’m a poor painter—a very poor painter, that cynic Bufton expresses it—and I have to work very hard to keep body and soul together. That reminds me, you must come and see me at the studio—it’s only a stone’s-throw away. I should like to show you some of my sketches, and—and——’

He paused with a flush, remembering suddenly his study of the Andromeda, the picture painted from memory and hanging at that moment on his easel.

‘ How clever you must be,’ she said softly, ‘ to paint such beautiful pictures! It must be splendid to be an artist.’

‘ Billy says I’m only a duffer,’ answered Somerset, now completely at his ease, and recovering much of his old impudence. ‘ Of course I know I’m not a heaven-born genius—very few of us are that. But I know the tricks of the trade, and

some day I shall do something decent. But let us talk of yourself—a subject far more interesting. I want you to explain to me——’

She interrupted him.

‘I suppose I’d better do so, or you’ll never be satisfied,’ she said, sinking into a chair. ‘Since we met on Canvey I’ve been left some money—a good deal of money for a girl like me—and I’ve come to London to spend it—some of it, at any rate. I was sick and tired of living down yonder like a savage; I was just going to run away when I heard the news.’

‘I congratulate you,’ said Somerset. ‘But who left you the money? Some relation?’

‘A sort of relation,’ answered Annie, looking down.

‘That explains something, but not everything. You’ve changed your surname. Is it possible that you’re married?’

For nearly a minute she did not answer, but continued to look down; then, as he leaned eagerly towards her, she raised her eyes and looked into his face. Her brow had darkened and she was very pale.

‘Yes, Mr. Somerset,’ she answered, ‘I was married when we met on Canvey.’

‘Married *then*? You don’t mean it!’ he exclaimed.

‘It’s true, though—and the person who left me the money is the man I married. It was years and years ago, when I was only sixteen, and directly after the marriage he went away to sea, and I didn’t think it a real marriage at all, till I got news the other day that he was dead.’

She had drawn her chair close to the table, and leaning on one elbow, rested her cheek on her hands. Her voice was low and weary, and her whole manner strangely sorrowful and subdued ; but her eyes still met his with the old frank fearlessness.

‘How strange!’ he murmured. ‘Married, and so young! And now you say you are a widow. It sounds like a fairy tale.’

‘It doesn’t seem real even to me,’ said Annie. ‘It seems like something that happened in a dream ; and, indeed, all my life seems much about the same. Often and often, when I’ve thought of it, I’ve wished I’d never been born.’

Then, as he continued to question her, she told him, still with the same air of weariness, the whole story of her childhood—how Matthew Watson had brought her home, how she had been reared in his sister’s house, and how, finally, she had gone through the marriage ceremony with him before he departed on his last voyage. As she proceeded her voice broke, and her dark eyes filled

with tears ; but amidst all her emotion there was a curious tone of anger and resentment, not unmingled with shame and dread ; and she never mentioned her husband without a kind of shudder, as if she shrank from the thought of him, the very mention of his name.

When she ended, Somerset, who had risen to his feet and stood looking down at her, said quietly :

‘ Then you’re maid, wife, and widow all in one ? I suppose you parted at the church door ? ’

‘ Something like that,’ she replied. ‘ He went away directly afterwards, and I’d almost forgotten all about it when the news came that he was dead.’ She added quickly : ‘ I am sure I don’t know why I tell you all this, since it’s no concern of yours.’

‘ It’s very much my concern,’ he answered gently, taking her hand in his.

‘ How’s that ? ’ she said, with a flash of the dark eyes.

‘ Because—because——’ He said no more, but bent his face towards hers as he pressed her hand.

‘ Oh, that’s all nonsense ! ’ she cried, releasing herself and rising quickly. ‘ You’re a gentleman, and I’m only Matt Watson’s girl. Please don’t let us talk of it any more. It makes me sick. You’d better go now, Mr. Somerset. I’m very

glad indeed to have met you again ; but now we'll say good-bye.'

'Annie,' he said, as she turned away from him, trembling, 'do you remember that day I followed you over the marshes towards Benfleet? Do you remember the kiss you gave me before we parted?'

Did she remember? Her face answered him without a single word, and for a moment she averted her head, but almost instantly she turned and looked at him, her eyes full of passionate light.

'Did you think I'd forgotten?' she replied, 'and do you think I'm ashamed to remember? I know I kissed you, and I don't care. I liked you ; I liked you from the time we first met. But that's all over now, isn't it? This isn't Canvey Island.'

'I wish to God it was!' cried Somerset.

'Wishing won't mend things. You've got to go your way, and I've got to go mine. Perhaps it's a pity we ever met again. Perhaps it will be better for us never to meet any more. Oh, don't, don't! I can't bear it!'

The last cry turned into a sob, for he had caught her in his arms, and was showering his kisses on her face. She struggled for a moment, then, unable to control the impulse of her happiness, she rested quietly in his embrace.

‘Annie dear,’ he whispered, ‘where is the need for you to talk like that, when you know you’re a free woman? I believe that it is Fate that has brought us again together. At any rate, I know now that I love you better than any woman in the world.’

‘You don’t mean that? You can’t mean it!’

‘But I do. When I saw you first I thought you beautiful, so beautiful that I could only look at you and wonder ; but then I remembered too late that I’d pledged myself to someone else, and so, like a coward, I ran away. But I didn’t forget you, hard as I tried to do so. Your face was always with me, and the touch of your kiss upon my lips. I couldn’t work. I couldn’t take an interest in anything. I went about mooning like a man in a dream. Then, when I was half-crazy, I saw you again, as beautiful as before, and it was all over with me for ever. Yes, that’s it,’ he added, with a touch of his old lightness, ‘there is no use fighting against the inevitable. The gods have settled it : the only woman in the world for me is my Andromeda !’

‘Don’t call me that,’ she murmured ; ‘call me Annie.’

‘My Annie, then, if you like it better,’ he said, drawing her close to him.

‘But your cousin—the young lady you——’

‘Which would be the wickedest,’ he inquired, ‘to marry her without caring for her, and to make both her and myself miserable, or to tell her frankly that I care for someone else? You see, it has only been a sort of family arrangement. We drifted into it before we knew what we were about. I don’t fancy she’ll mind very much—she’ll only be a little piqued.’

‘I don’t believe that!’ said Annie, gently disengaging herself from his hold; ‘and if she loves you, as I believe she must, it wouldn’t be right to break your word. Besides, as I told you before, you’re a gentleman, and I’m only Matt Watson’s widow. I always knew nothing could come of it, nothing but trouble; but for all that I’m glad, I can’t tell you how glad, to think that you like me, and that if I’d been a lady——’

‘A lady!’ repeated Somerset. ‘You’re better than that. At the theatre last night you looked like a princess! Come, Annie, there’s no escape; I’m not going to let anyone else run away with you.’

She smiled and looked delighted, for never, indeed, had she felt so happy; but, looking at him wistfully, she asked:

‘Then you don’t mind my being married?’

‘Such a marriage as that doesn’t count,’ he replied, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Of course, I

should like it better if nothing of the sort had ever taken place; but, after all, you were only a child, and since the man is dead, and can never return to claim you——'

'He died out in America,' said Annie eagerly; 'and before he died, he left me all his money. It was very good of him, wasn't it?'

'Awfully good,' returned Somerset; but his face darkened, and he turned away as if distressed.

'There, now you're angry!' she cried; 'I knew you would be when you knew.'

'No, no; you're quite mistaken. What I was thinking of was this: now you've got money, my dear, it makes things rather more difficult. Some people would think it mean of me to come after you under the circumstances; for, you see, I'm only a poor devil of an artist, and they might fancy——'

'No one would think that,' she cried; 'and if they did, it wouldn't be true.'

'Certainly it wouldn't. But all the same, my dear, I want you to understand that I'm not going to take advantage of your good-nature. I'm not asking you to marry me now, and I shan't ask you till my position is very different; but if you care for me enough to wait for me, and to give me a chance of establishing myself in the world,

why then,' he added, with a laugh, 'we can snap our fingers at everybody.'

At this moment the door opened, and Mrs. Major Garthorne, resplendently attired, sailed into the room. On seeing Somerset, she drew back with a dignified gesture of surprise, and seemed about to withdraw; but Annie, smiling somewhat nervously, called her back and introduced her.

'My friend Mrs. Garthorne. Mrs. Garthorne, this is Mr. Somerset, whom I met last night at the theatre.'

The lady gave a stately bow, which Somerset returned smilingly. Then, conscious of the embarrassment caused by her intrusion, Mrs. Garthorne again moved towards the door, and with a little significant cough, to imply that she knew herself to be *de trop*, and another stately inclination, disappeared.

'Who's the dragon?' asked Somerset, with twinkling eyes.

Annie explained, and the young man seemed mightily amused.

'My dear Annie,' he cried, 'what on earth can you want with a chaperon like that? For my part, I much prefer Mother Endell.'

'She has been very kind to me,' answered Annie, 'and she knows all about London. There, now you're laughing at me!'

His arm stole round her waist.

‘What a queer world it is!’ he said, drawing her close to him. She thought it a very sweet world, as he bent down his head and kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE STUDIO.

EARLY on the forenoon of the following day Somerset burst into the studio, looking radiant and handsome as a young god. Bufton was hard at work as usual, busy on an unfinished landscape, the sketch of which he had made on Canvey Island. Leroy was at the club, mildly enjoying his triumph as the theatrical hero of the hour.

The cynic saw in a moment that something unusual had occurred, but he said nothing, only smiling to himself as Somerset, singing aloud from sheer gaiety of heart, threw off his coat, donned his linen painting-jacket, and began working, with flushed cheek and eager hands, on the unfinished picture of Andromeda.

At last, with an eager cry, he threw his palette and painting-brush away, and began striding up and down the room.

‘It’s no use,’ he at last exclaimed ; ‘I can’t do it. I’m a duffer !’

‘So you’ve discovered it at last,’ said Bufton.

‘You may chaff your fill, Billy, but there are some subjects which are beyond the power of even genius, and that’s one !’ Here he pointed to the canvas. ‘Besides, it’s profanity to attempt such a picture—downright profanity ! It was like my cheek to think of it.’

He threw himself into a chair, and, leaning back, continued :

‘From this time forward, however, I’m going to work in good earnest. No more idling—no more dawdling at the clubs. I’ve got my living to earn, and, in order to insure that most desirable object, I shall devote myself for a time to pot-boilers. Then, when my worldly position is secure, I shall return to high art, and paint to please myself.’

Bufton only grunted and made no comment, for he felt certain that something more was coming.

After a pause the young man said, with a forced laugh :

‘Did I tell you that I’d seen her again ?’

‘Seen whom ?’ queried Bufton, though he knew perfectly well to whom his friend was alluding.

‘My Annie—my Andromeda. She’s staying at rather a swagger boarding-house in Bloomsbury.

I think I told you that she had come into some money?’

‘Yes,’ answered Bufton, ‘and that she was a married woman.’

‘Just so,’ answered Somerset thoughtfully—‘a married woman, if you like to put it in that way. But between you and me, Billy, she’s only a very little bit married, and the little bit don’t count. If you’ll promise not to make nasty remarks, I’ll tell you all about it.’

Bufton did not promise anything of the kind, being quite certain that Somerset was dying to communicate his information. Before many minutes had passed he knew as much as Somerset knew himself about Annie’s extraordinary marriage and subsequent history.

‘It’s quite a romance, you see,’ Somerset observed when he had finished the explanation. ‘Didn’t I always tell you that she was no ordinary girl? I shouldn’t be surprised if she turned out to be——’

‘Of noble birth, and all that sort of thing,’ interposed Bufton, with a chuckle. ‘The regular stereotyped heroine of a penny dreadful! Make your mind easy; these things don’t happen. It’s a queer story, though, and the most interesting figure in it, to my fancy, is that poor devil of a sailor who brought the girl up.’

‘Yes; I suppose he wasn’t a bad sort,’ said Somerset dubiously.

‘A bad sort? He was a trump, I tell you. It’s not every man who would rescue a strange brat, and educate it, and look after it like a father, as this fellow did. So he married her, did he? Well, he might have done worse. Was she fond of him?’

‘How could she be? He was old enough to be her father.’

‘Humph! That’s what she tells you; but women are queer cattle, and——’

‘Annie was only a child,’ exclaimed Somerset angrily.

‘She was sixteen,’ returned Bufton dryly, ‘and from what I’ve seen of her she must have been precocious. Is she certain that the poor chap is dead?’

‘Oh, quite certain. He died in Alaska, leaving her everything he possessed.’

‘Didn’t I tell you he was a trump? I like that fellow! I should like to shake him by the hand.’

This ebullition of opinion on the part of Bufton rather disconcerted his hearer, who rose again to his feet, and began pacing up and down the studio.

‘Well, what next?’ demanded Bufton, watching him keenly. ‘I suppose the little fool has had her head turned with her good fortune, and is spending the money without so much as a thought for the

man who left it to her? What's she doing in London, dressed up like a fine lady? Why didn't she stop in the country, and, if she must marry again, pick up some decent fellow in her own walk in life?'

'Who said she was going to marry again?' cried Somerset angrily. 'What beastly things you say! You haven't a grain of sentiment!'

Bufton grinned diabolically, and was about to reply when there was a tap at the studio door, which opened softly to admit two ladies, who stood hesitating on the threshold. One was a grave, sharp-featured matron of about fifty, dressed in widow's weeds; the other a young girl of about twenty, tall, slightly built, and elegantly attired, wearing a long cloak of sealskin and a coquettish little hat to match, of the same material.

'May we come in?' said the elder lady, smiling and suiting the action to the word.

'Come in? Of course,' returned Somerset, crossing to meet her. 'My dear mother, whatever brings you here? Ethel too? This is a surprise!'

Judging from his expression, the surprise did not seem an altogether pleasant one, but he forced a smile while glancing rather uneasily at Bufton, with whom the elder lady was shaking hands.

'We were in the neighbourhood,' said

Mrs. Somerset, 'and Ethel thought we might look in. I hope we're not interfering with your work.'

'Not at all,' answered Bufton, offering her a chair; 'we were only talking. I was giving your son good advice, and being hanged for my pains, as usual.'

As he spoke the younger lady was glancing curiously around the studio. She was decidedly good-looking, with clear, well-cut features, reddish auburn hair, a somewhat pronounced nose, and fine gray eyes; but being short-sighted, she used an eyeglass, which she held in her hand by its tortoiseshell handle, and placed before her eyes from time to time. She had a habit, moreover, of half-closing her eyelids when looking closely at anything, and this, combined with a somewhat scornful curve of the lips, made her look at once high-bred and supercilious.

'Well, how are you?' she asked carelessly, looking with a half-smile at Somerset. 'All right, I hope, and not working your poor self to death? You never invited me to see the studio, so I thought I'd invite myself. You don't mind?'

'Of course not,' replied Somerset. 'I'm delighted. Won't you—won't you sit down?'

'No, thank you. I've been driving with aunt all the morning, and prefer to stand or move

about. 'What are you working at? Something new?'

So saying, she again looked round the studio, glancing at the finished and unfinished canvases, the lay figure, the books and sketches scattered about, until suddenly her eyes fell on the unfinished picture of the Andromeda. In a moment her face grew mischievous, and up went the eyeglass.

'Oh!' she said in mock surprise, while Somerset flushed red with annoyance; 'is that a fancy sketch, or a study from the life?'

'Ethel!' cried Mrs. Somerset.

'Oh, Charlie doesn't mind me, aunt—he knows I'm not a prude. What's the subject, Charlie? Something antique?'

'The subject of that masterpiece,' said Bufton, laughing, 'is Andromeda, the Grecian Princess who was chained to a rock in order that she might be eaten by a sea-monster.'

'Oh, indeed!' returned Ethel, calmly continuing her scrutiny. 'I think I remember. Perseus or somebody came and rescued her, didn't he? But where's Perseus, and where's the monster? All I see is a very pink lady, in the costume of the bath.'

With an angry exclamation Somerset strode across the room, and threw a cloth over the

canvas. Ethel laughed lightly, then shrugged her shoulders, while the elder lady vainly motioned her to be silent.

‘Never mind, Charlie,’ continued Ethel, turning and looking at him through her eyeglass, as coolly as she had looked at the picture; ‘I’m not at all shocked. One gets well seasoned, you know, at both the Academy and the Salon. But I always wonder where our artists get such subjects. They can’t manufacture them out of their own heads.’

‘They do, though, very often,’ exclaimed Bufton, while Somerset, red and furious, bit his lips to subdue his mortification. ‘You see, the antique comes easy to most of us, because it can’t be judged by ordinary standards of experience. You’d perceive at once if a street urchin or a modern young lady was out of character or out of drawing, but you can’t apply the same tests of accuracy to an unreal goddess.’

‘But people, real people, sit for such subjects, don’t they?’ persisted Ethel, with a sly glance at Somerset. ‘In the costume of the bath, I mean?’

‘Ethel! Ethel!’ cried Mrs. Somerset, ‘you are really dreadful!’

‘Oh, aunt,’ replied Ethel, ‘if such pictures are not fit to be discussed, they’re surely not fit to be

painted. Unto the pure, however, all things are pure. Eh, Mr. Bufton?’

‘Decidedly!’ cried Bufton.

‘Then why should Charlie be so annoyed with me for looking at that picture? I’m sure I see no harm in it if he doesn’t. “Honi soit qui mal y pense,” you know.’

By this time Somerset had recovered himself.

‘My dear Ethel,’ he said, ‘I’m not the least bit annoyed. I suppose I’m a little thin-skinned, and I—well, I thought you were chaffing. Come, let’s talk of something else. Shall I get you something to take—a glass of wine, or a cup of tea?’

‘Not for me, thank you. I think we must be going. We only just dropped in to see what you were about.’

‘Like angels’ visits, short and far between,’ interposed Bufton.

‘Not much of that sort of thing about me, I’m afraid,’ the girl replied, laughing. ‘To tell you the truth, Mr. Bufton, I was curious. I’d read such dreadful things about artists and artists’ studios, and I wanted to see with my own eyes what Charlie’s workshop was like.’ Here she raised the eyeglass, and glanced again round the studio. ‘I don’t see anything very improper. Things are a little chaotic and not particularly clean, that’s all. With the help of a charwoman

the place might be made to look quite respectable.'

As she spoke, lightly and airily, her eyes fell on a piano standing in a corner of the room—an old semi-grand, on the top of which were piled all sorts of odds and ends.

'Why, there's actually a piano!' she exclaimed, walking over to the instrument, and throwing it open; then, moving her fingers rapidly over the keys, she continued: 'Awfully out of tune, as I expected.'

'It's not often used,' explained Bufton. 'Leroy plays a little, and now and then one of the models amuses herself with it.'

Meantime Ethel had drawn a chair to the piano, no music-stool being available, and seating herself, had taken off her gloves and begun to play. It was clear that she was an accomplished musician. She began with the air of an old German folk-song, passed from that to the *motif* of a sonata by Beethoven, and then, without the slightest transition, struck the notes of a street song, then very popular, 'In the Strand.'

'My dear Ethel,' cried Mrs. Somerset, 'for goodness' sake don't play that horribly vulgar thing! If you must play, let it be something different. You know how Charles loves to hear you when you play those lovely sonatas.'

‘Do you, Charlie?’ asked Ethel, glancing over her shoulder.

‘Of course I do!’ said Somerset, with a lame attempt at tenderness.

Ethel replied by laughing merrily and plunging into another popular and equally vulgar air; then springing up, she cried:

‘What a horrid piano! One could get as much music out of a tin kettle. Well, aunt, are you ready to toddle?’

Mrs. Somerset gasped and looked imploringly at her companion. After a little more careless conversation, ending with a promise on Somerset’s part to look round on his mother that evening, the two ladies departed. At the door Ethel held up her cheek, and the young man just touched it with his lips. She half-closed her eyes and looked at him quietly with the critical air peculiar to her, and then with a little shrug tripped away. Somerset re-entered the studio looking as haggard and upset as if he had seen a ghost. Bufton had settled himself again to work, but had lighted his pipe. He glanced up quickly, and the eyes of the two men met. Somerset groaned.

‘You see how the land lies, Billy? I’m the most miserable fellow in creation.’

‘What’s the matter with you?’ demanded the cynic.

‘As if you need to ask!’ said Somerset. ‘I’m engaged to marry my cousin Ethel, and I’ve given my heart and soul to another woman. How the devil am I to get out of it? Tell me that. For God’s sake don’t chaff me, old fellow, but give me your honest advice.’

Buften pulled at his pipe and painted quietly for some minutes, then asked :

‘How far have you gone with the other one—I mean this time; that business down at Canvey Island needn’t count.’

‘I’ve told her that I love her—I’ve told her that I hope to marry her some day, if she’ll only wait till I’ve a home to offer her.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Oh, she didn’t say much, but she let me understand that she would wait.’

‘Does she know about your engagement?’

‘Yes, I told her about that long ago—when we parted at Canvey.’

Buften knocked the ashes from his pipe on the side of the easel.

‘It’s an ugly affair, youngster. I’m afraid you haven’t acted like a man of honour.’

Somerset started and flushed crimson, while the other continued :

‘I warned you from the first as to what would come of it. You’d no right whatever to be on

with the new love before you were off with the old. You say I've no sentiment, and I don't want any, if this is what it leads to.'

'But look here, old fellow,' pleaded the young man, 'isn't it as clear as daylight that Ethel doesn't care a rap about me? She has only dropped into the engagement to please my mother.'

'What a fool you must be to think so!' exclaimed Bufton, almost angrily. 'Why, the girl is as fond of you as she can possibly be, and she shows it in everything she does. She knows well enough, however, that you're drifting away from her. The moment she entered the studio and began to talk, I saw that she was only acting. All that supercilious manner of hers, all the chaff and laughter, are only put on. Her instinct tells her that you're running after someone else.'

'I don't believe she'd mind,' said Somerset. 'She's not a girl of very deep feeling.'

'Don't make too sure of that,' was the reply. 'It isn't always the dreamy, lackadaisical, soft-spoken women that feel the most. Your cousin's a high stepper, but she feels a great deal more than you suspect.'

'I hope not, Billy—I hope not, with all my soul!' said Somerset earnestly. 'God knows I don't want to do anything mean or caddish or dis-

she was the widow of an obscure gentleman in the Civil Service, who had lived for many years in India, and had finally retired on a small independence. He had died when Charles was a boy of fifteen, studying at Harrow, but after his death the widow, on an income of about six hundred a year, left to her by her husband, had contrived to send the boy to Cambridge, where he had taken his Bachelor's degree. Finally, to his mother's surprise, and not a little to her disgust, he had announced his intention of becoming a professional artist—a *modus vivendi* not quite so profitable in those Bohemian days as it has become since, and infinitely less fashionable.

The late Mr. Somerset had purchased The Laurels on a long lease, many years of which had yet to expire, so that the widow lived practically rent free, and kept up a quite respectable position on her modest income. Charles was her only child, and she was an affectionate if not a very demonstrative mother. No sooner, therefore, was it made quite clear to her that her son was determined to follow art as a profession than she did her very utmost to forward his views and supply him with the necessary money. It was a pinch, of course, but she made it cheerfully enough. Thanks to her, he was able to study under the best masters both in London and Paris, until he had become, in the

course of time, a very fair painter. Of late years he had chummed with Bufton and Leroy, only staying with his mother at intervals ; and at the time when the two ladies made their unexpected visit to the studio, he had not visited The Laurels for several weeks.

This was the more extraordinary as his cousin, Ethel Norman, to whom he was informally engaged, was just then staying on a long visit to her aunt. Ethel, we may explain, was the eldest daughter of Mrs. Somerset's half-brother, who was one of the lesser magnates on the Stock Exchange, but who lived on a small estate at Woodford, where he had brought up a large family. It will be gathered from this that Ethel was likely to inherit money ; her mother, indeed, had possessed a considerable fortune of her own, which was to be divided equally among her children.

Ethel, as we have seen, was a somewhat unconventional girl of rather free and independent manners. She had only one sister and half a dozen brothers, two of them, her elders, being employed in the City ; and constant intercourse with these brothers of hers, who had the go-ahead manners and habits of their class, had prevented her from acquiring the timid, mock-modest airs of less sophisticated young ladies. For the rest, she was clever, not unamiable, and very accomplished,

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especially in music, for which she had a natural gift.

On the evening of the day when they had called at the studio in Bloomsbury, Ethel and her aunt sat together in the drawing-room at The Laurels. Mrs. Somerset was seated by the fire, reading one of the journals; Ethel had just risen from the piano. Both the elder and the younger lady were attired in the dinner costume of the period—a costume hideous enough from our modern point of view, since, alas! large skirts and crinolines were then the fashion.

‘I don’t suppose he’ll come after all,’ said Ethel carelessly. ‘He didn’t seem over keen about it.’

‘But he promised,’ returned Mrs. Somerset, looking up from her journal, ‘and you know he always keeps his word.’

‘Always, aunt?’ queried the girl, with a curious little laugh.

‘Why, of course. I’m afraid, however, that you annoyed him exceedingly this morning. I was shocked at you, Ethel—really shocked. The way you discussed that unfinished picture was really too dreadful!’

‘Think so?’ murmured Ethel thoughtfully, rubbing the tip of her nose with the edge of her eyeglass. ‘Well, somehow or other Charlie and

I always manage to rub each other the wrong way.'

'There again!' exclaimed Mrs. Somerset, lifting up her hands. 'Your expressions! Sometimes they positively make my blood run cold!'

'I suppose I pick them up from the boys.'

'Then I must entreat you to consider before you use them. You see, poor Charles is so sensitive, and has such a lofty idea of our sex. Little things like that shock him, dear. I have often heard him say that the most beautiful thing in all the world is maidenly modesty.'

Ethel made a pretty little grimace, and shrugged her shoulders.

'What do you mean by that, you provoking girl?' demanded her aunt.

'I was thinking, aunt,' was the reply, 'that there can't be much "maidenly modesty" knocking about among the models in Bloomsbury.'

'"Knocking about!"' echoed Mrs. Somerset; 'What an expression! Who ever would think to hear you that you'd had such a perfect education? As to what you say about models, Ethel, you certainly exaggerate. Charles has again and again assured me that they are most respectable, well-conducted persons, and that it is a quite unusual thing for any one of them to sit for the—the undraped figure. Of course, dear, it is sometimes

necessary, though I certainly cannot say that I approve of it.'

'Oh, it's all right, I suppose,' said Ethel, turning to the fireplace, and drumming with the fingers of her right hand on the mantelpiece, while she glanced at herself in the mirror above it; then, after an inspection of a few minutes, she said very quietly, still with her eyes on the reflection:

'Aunt, do you think Charlie really cares for me?'

'My dear child!' cried Mrs. Somerset, in honest amazement; 'what are you saying? Cares for you? Of course he cares for you! Are you not engaged to be married?'

'Yes, of course, I know that,' said Ethel, still in the same quiet tones, and with her eyes half closed, peering into the mirror. 'But I've thought sometimes, and especially lately, that he doesn't find much fun in our engagement. I seem to bore him, rather. Of course, I don't expect him to be always spooning me, like a lover in a novel, but I think he ought to show me, now and then, at any rate, that I'm something more to him than a mere cousin.'

'Your expressions are terrible,' answered the elder lady. 'However, you may rest assured that Charles loves you dearly. You mustn't mistake his buoyant manner for indifference. You see, he

is not at all demonstrative to anyone. He is like yourself, Ethel—he very often assumes a light and careless tone to conceal the depth of his attachments.’

‘Is that really so, aunt?’ asked the girl, with a quiet smile. ‘Of course you understand him better than I do. I rather thought his tendency was to err the other way, and be all enthusiasm. At any rate, he used to be a great deal livelier. I’ve noticed a change in him ever since he went away holiday-making last year.’

‘Only your fancy, dear. You see, the poor boy is so anxious to get on in his profession, and it worries him a great deal that he is able to earn so little money. It is a thousand pities, I think, that he ever became a painter. If he had only been willing, your father could have secured him a splendid opening in the City, and he might have become a rich man.’

‘I rather admire him for that,’ said Ethel.

‘For what, dear?’

‘For sticking to his art, and despising stocks and shares,’ was the reply. ‘I hate everything connected with the City; I’ve been so overdosed with it between father and the boys. And you don’t think he’s really sorry about our engagement? If he was, you know, I’d be quite willing to let him off.’

‘Don’t mention such a thing!’ exclaimed Mrs. Somerset. ‘Why, it has been a settled thing ever since you were boy and girl!’

It was now close on seven o’clock, an unusually late hour for dinner in the early sixties.

‘I don’t think he’ll come,’ said Ethel, looking at the clock on the mantelpiece.

However, they waited until nearly half-past seven, and then, as there was still no sign of the young man, Mrs. Somerset ordered the dinner to be served. They had just finished their soup when there was a knock and a ring at the door, and directly afterwards Somerset was shown into the dining-room. He explained, eagerly and apologetically, that he had been detained by some unexpected business, and then sat down to the table.

During the meal he was very talkative, and drank—Ethel noticed this, though his mother did not—an unusual amount of wine. His tone was light and gay enough, but to Ethel’s thinking there was a certain constraint in his manner, and she observed that he seldom, if ever, looked her in the face.

After dinner, in the drawing-room, Ethel played. Presently Mrs. Somerset stole quietly from the room, leaving the young couple together. There was a long silence, filled only by the low music of the piano.

‘How beautifully you play!’ cried the young man, as the girl paused with her fingers on the keys. She waited quietly, half expecting that he would come over to her, as he had done on former occasions, and steal a caress; but he was sitting motionless in an arm-chair, with his eyes on the fire.

Her fingers trembled on the keys; then, turning round on the music-stool, she gazed at him quietly through her eyeglass. Her under-lip quivered slightly as she said, with her usual careless manner:

‘You’re not angry with me, Charlie, for what I said in the studio? I was only chaffing, you know.’

‘Of course,’ he answered, still not looking at her.

‘Then what’s the matter? You don’t seem yourself to-night.’

‘I’m not myself,’ he said. ‘I’m—I’m worried out of my life.’

‘About money?’

‘Oh no, not about money.’

‘What then? Can’t I help you? I’d try, you know, if you’d frankly tell me what troubled you.’

He did not reply, nor did he turn his eyes towards her. After watching him quietly, she walked over to him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

‘Look here, Charlie,’ she said quietly ; ‘cards on the table, please. Is it anything about our engagement?’

He was still silent, but she felt him trembling beneath her touch.

‘I thought so,’ she said, withdrawing her hand and moving towards the mantelpiece, on which she leaned one elbow while she looked down at his averted face. ‘Well, why need that worry you? If you want to carry your goods to another market, I shan’t make any objection—only you might have been straight with me and told me a little sooner.’

‘I was afraid,’ he murmured. ‘I dreaded to give you pain.’

‘Awfully thoughtful of you, I’m sure,’ she returned, not without a certain bitterness. ‘Well, better late than never. You want to be free? All right! Cut the traces and gallop off!’

He looked up at her at last, his eyes sparkling, his face flushed.

‘Do you mean to say you don’t mind?’

‘That’s my business, not yours. I certainly don’t want to keep you against your will, and I’m not likely to break my heart for any man. I’m thinking more of your mother than myself. She’ll be awfully worried, you know.’

‘But you yourself?’ he exclaimed, rising and

standing by her. 'You're quite sure that you don't care?'

He took her hand, but she drew it away a little impatiently.

'I've told you the truth,' she answered. 'You're free to go. Please don't be sentimental about it. I think you'd better leave me to break it to your mother ; I'll choose my own time, and I promise not to give you away.'

'I hate myself for what I'm doing—it makes me feel so mean.'

She smiled coldly and shrugged her shoulders.

'We shall always be friends?' he pleaded.

'Of course. Aren't we cousins? By the way, Charlie, who's the party? You might as well tell me all about it.'

She seemed so careless, so indifferent, that he was almost on the point of doing as she requested, when she continued :

'On reflection, perhaps you'd better not. I'm not at all curious, only I hope, for aunt's sake, that she's a lady, and not one of the girls you paint in natural bathing costume.'

So saying, she walked over to the piano and began to play a lively tune out of the last Strand burlesque.

Very little more was said, for she seemed to resist all further attempts at conversation ; and a

little later, before the reappearance of his mother, he hurried from the house.

When Mrs. Somerset entered the room, she found her niece still at the piano, playing softly one of Beethoven's songs without words; and in answer to her inquiries Ethel explained that the young man had had to hurry away to meet an important engagement. No suspicion that anything was wrong crossed the elder lady's mind; but if she had been a little more observant, she might have seen that the girl's lightness of manner was only assumed, and that she had been quietly crying. For a long time Ethel continued to play, and all the time her bosom heaved painfully and her eyes were misted with tears.

Meantime Somerset had bounded in on Bufton, who was seated by the studio fire, reading a volume of Ruskin's 'Modern Painters.' In a few words he explained what had taken place, and expressed his satisfaction that Ethel had taken the disclosure so phlegmatically.

'I told you she wouldn't mind,' he concluded. 'She was as willing to release me as I was willing to go.'

Bufton looked him from head to foot and grinned ferociously.

'You miserable young cad!' he replied. 'Do you think that those feel most who shriek and

blubber, and wear their hearts upon their sleeves ?
Your cousin's a brick, and worth a dozen of you !
If you stuck a knife into her heart, she'd be too
proud and plucky to utter a word.'

'I know her better than you do,' retorted
Somerset. 'She took it quite coolly, and almost
wished me good luck.'

'Much of that you deserve !' growled the cynic.
'It would serve you right if the Monster came up
from the sea after all, and made a meal of your
precious Andromeda.'

CHAPTER XVI.

HIGH TIDE.

THE course of true love, or of selfish love for that matter, never does run smooth. For a brief period after that blissful interview with her Prince Charming, Annie was in a high state of ecstasy ; she felt her lover's kisses still upon her lips, the music of his voice was still ringing in her ears as pleasantly as the chime of wedding bells. As the hours wore on, however, a reaction came, and she felt far less happy. Naturally sympathetic and superstitious, she could not avoid thinking of that other girl to whom Somerset had first given his love ; nor could she help feeling that the nature which had changed once so rapidly might be likely to change again. She realized, moreover, that the young man's friends and relations might regard very unfavourably his love affair with one who was practically nameless, and far beneath him in social position.

The morning after their meeting she rose late, after an almost sleepless night, and her beautiful face looked worn and troubled as she joined Bess Lawrence in their private room at Tenterden's. She had ordered their breakfast to be sent upstairs, but she could eat nothing, and sat dejectedly sipping her cup of tea. Bess watched her anxiously, not daring to say a word. The change surprised her little friend, for when they had parted on the previous night Annie had appeared the very picture of delight.

At last Annie rose and began walking nervously up and down the room.

'What's the matter?' Bess cried at last. 'Are you not well, Annie?'

'I don't know,' was the reply. 'I feel creepy, just as if someone was walking over my grave.'

'And yet last night you seemed so happy, dear.'

'I'm happy still,' said Annie. 'All I hoped and prayed for has come to pass. And yet for all that it seems as if it couldn't last, as if something was going to happen.'

She paused at the window, gazing out into the dark street, and then said over her shoulder :

'I had a horrible dream, Bess, when I dropped to sleep in the gray of the morning.'

'Oh, dreams don't matter!' returned Bess. 'At any rate, they go by contraries.'

But Annie went on without heeding her, still fixing her eyes on the street :

‘I thought I was all alone in a boat at sea, and it was lovely golden weather, and the water was as calm as glass ; and I was rowing myself along and singing, when another boat came dancing over the smooth waves, and *he* was seated in it and singing, too ; and we rowed along together, laughing and smiling at one another, and sometimes reaching over and joining hands. Then, Bess, he leaned over and kissed me, and just as our lips met I saw something rising out of the water like a seal or a big black dog. Well, it came closer and closer and clung on the stern of my boat, and when I looked at it I saw that it was Matt Watson, all wet and dripping, with long hair like seaweed and a great beard all over foam ; and he looked at me and rolled his black eyes at me and ground his teeth in rage, while he tried to climb into the boat ! Then all at once the waves grew white and stormy, and the wind shrieked, and there was a flash of lightning from the sky, and he was creeping nearer and nearer, groaning and dripping and reaching out his hands to seize hold of me, when I screamed and woke.’

As she spoke in a low voice, almost in a whisper, she trembled with dread, but the dark line met over her eyes in an angry frown.

‘You mustn’t think about it,’ said Bess soothingly. ‘As I said, Annie, dreams go by contraries; and if the dream means anything, it only means perhaps that you’re going to be married again.’

‘Do you think that, Bess?’ cried Annie, turning eagerly.

‘Of course I do,’ answered the girl. ‘You see, dear, you were thinking about Mr. Somerset, and your mind went back naturally to the man who wedded you when you were a child.’

‘I shouldn’t wonder,’ said Annie thoughtfully. ‘Yes, you’re right. I’ve often had bad dreams like that, and they meant no harm.’

She crossed the room and dropped into a chair by the fire.

Presently she said :

‘He wished me to go round and see him at the place where he paints. Suppose we go?’

‘To-day do you mean?’

‘To-day or to-morrow, or some day soon. It’s close by, he told me.’

‘If I were you, Annie, I shouldn’t run after him,’ said Bess primly. ‘The best way to keep a lover is to make him run after you.’

Annie laughed, and her face brightened.

‘Oh, you needn’t be afraid,’ she cried; ‘he’s far too fond of me to be frightened away so easily.’

Besides, I want to see his friend, Mr. Bufton, who came with him to Canvey.'

The day passed away and there was no sign of Somerset. Annie felt a little disappointed, for she had rather expected him to call. In the evening she dined at the general table, and seemed as bright and merry as anyone there. When she kissed Bess and wished her good-night she looked radiant ; the cloud of the morning had altogether passed away.

'We'll go round to-morrow,' she whispered. 'I'm longing to see Mr. Bufton.'

Early on the afternoon of the following day the two girls went out together. The snow had melted and the weather was quite fine and clear ; so they walked through Bloomsbury and soon discovered the region in which the studio was situated. Bess was simply dressed in a dark stuff gown, a plainly cut cloth jacket, and a rather Puritanical bonnet. As for Annie, she wore black silk, of which she was very fond, a jacket of sealskin, then very fashionable, and a stylish hat with a feather ; nothing in her attire or manner suggested the country girl. So pretty did she look, and so bright and graceful was her carriage, that more than one person turned to look after her as she passed. Thanks to her early training in the open air, she walked with the strength and

ease of a young athlete, and even the crinoline which she wore, following the detestable fashion of those days, could not altogether conceal the grace and symmetry of her perfect form.

In the course of time they found themselves standing nervously at the door marked 'Studio.' They had been directed to it by a horsey-looking person connected with the mews, who grinned at them facetiously when Annie asked for Mr. Somerset.

After a moment's hesitation, Annie rang the bell. It was answered almost immediately by a mild-featured, bald-headed gentleman in his shirt-sleeves, whom Annie did not know, but who was no other than George Constable Leroy.

'Does Mr. Somerset live here?' asked Annie, smiling.

Leroy gazed in admiring wonder at the radiant apparition, and answering her smile, he replied :

'He doesn't exactly live here, but he has a share of the studio. He hasn't been here this morning, but I'm expecting him every moment.'

'And Mr. Bufton?' asked Annie, hesitating what to do.

'Oh, Bufton is inside. Would you like to see him? If so, will you step in?'

Annie nodded, and tripped into the studio, followed by her companion. The room was in

its usual untidy condition, with canvases, paint-pots, books, and odds and ends scattered everywhere in confusion. The picture on Somerset's easel was still covered with a cloth; it had not been touched, indeed, since the visit of Mrs. Somerset and her niece.

'If you'll sit down,' said the dramatist, pointing to a couple of rickety chairs, 'I'll tell Bufton you are here. What name shall I say?'

'Never mind the name,' replied Annie. 'You may say it's a friend from the country.'

Leroy disappeared into one of the bedrooms, where Bufton was at that moment making his toilette, preparatory to going out, and as the girls waited, they heard the following conversation:

'Someone to see you, Billy.'

'To see me? Who the deuce is it?'

'Friends from the country—two ladies.'

'The devil! But I haven't any friends in the country.'

'One of them is a lovely girl, Billy.'

'Rubbish!'

'Upon my word, she is simply charming. And she looks a swell. She may have come after one of your pictures.'

'All right,' growled the voice of Bufton. 'I'll be there directly.'

Annie, immensely amused, could scarcely refrain from bursting into a peal of merry laughter, while Bess, who was more retiring, smiled timidly. Presently Leroy re-emerged, having put on a shabby velvet jacket ; and the moment afterwards Bufton followed, dressed for the street, and looking, in his long walking-cloak and wide-awake hat, like an amiable brigand. He still wore the black patch over his eye, and it did not improve his appearance.

The moment his eyes fell on Annie, who rose smiling to greet him, he uttered an exclamation.

‘By Jove, if it isn’t Andromeda!’

Annie, much as she disliked the appellation, laughed merrily.

‘Didn’t you know I was in London, Mr. Bufton?’ she asked, as they shook hands.

‘Yes, the young un told me something about it,’ he replied grimly, inspecting her critically with his Cyclopean eye. ‘But let me look at you. You’re the same, yet not the same. Fancy the maid of Canvey in a crinoline!’

‘This is my friend Miss Lawrence,’ said Annie, introducing Bess.

‘How d’ye do, miss?’ returned Bufton, with an affable nod ; then, turning again to Annie, ‘How’s the old pirate of the Lobster Smack? And Mother Endell, and everybody? All right,

I hope. Leroy, this is the original of the youngster's chromo-lithograph.'

Leroy smiled and bowed, blinking blandly through his spectacles.

'Now I remember,' he observed. 'I saw you, I think, at the theatre the other night. I hope you liked the play? I—in fact, I wrote it.'

Of course, Annie had liked it very much, and she honestly said so. Bess also stammered her admiration, gazing in simple wonder on the first live author to whom she had ever been introduced.

'Somerset isn't at home,' observed Bufton presently. 'You see, he doesn't live here, but turns up now and then with the milk—not every day, though, for he's a lazy beggar.'

'But I came to see you,' said Annie, laughing. 'I thought I'd like to tell you that I was living in London.'

'I knew it,' he answered, 'for I, too, saw you at the play, though I couldn't believe it was the same. You were such a swell, you see. Excuse me for saying so, but I liked you better in your country togs. Nature never meant you for a fine lady, my dear; if she had, she wouldn't have given you such a figure.'

The ice thus broken, they chatted together in familiar fashion, and even Bess began to feel

quite at home with the two Bohemians. Bufton's manner, though rough and not very polite, was always so full of real respect for womanhood that women of all degrees were invariably at ease in his company; and as for Leroy, he was the gentlest, kindest, and most pure-minded of men, in whom all honest natures felt immediate confidence.

They were chatting quite merrily together when the door opened and Somerset entered. He wore a light-coloured overcoat, of the kind fashionable in those days, and what was then known as a 'top-hat.' We mention these insignificant details to explain certain allusions in the subsequent dialogue.

'So you have come!' he cried gaily, glancing, nevertheless, with some uneasiness at Bufton. 'I hardly expected you so soon,' he added as they shook hands.

'Bess and I were passing,' returned Annie, 'and we thought we'd accept your invitation.'

'Well, I hope these fellows have been entertaining you properly.'

'Oh yes!' cried the girls in one breath.

'We've been telling her,' said Bufton, 'what a swell you are, and how good it is of you to condescend to chum with poor devils like us, who haven't a top-hat between us. We haven't shown

her the chromo-lithograph ; we've left that for you.'

Somerset coloured up and glanced at the easel.

'Is it a picture of yours?' asked Annie. 'You will show it to us, won't you?'

'Not yet,' he stammered ; 'it's not finished. Perhaps it never will be.'

He took a rapid turn across the studio, adjusted the cloth more closely over the canvas, and then, returning, held out both hands and took those of Annie.

'I want these friends of mine to understand one thing,' he cried—'that you've promised to be my wife.'

'But I haven't promised,' Annie said, blushing and turning away her face.

'Well, then, you shall promise now. You've dropped into the lions' den, you see, and I'm not going to let you escape without that condition. Billy here has been chaffing me about you ever since we met at the theatre, and I want him to distinctly understand that it's no chaffing matter.' He threw his arm round her waist and presented her to his comrades with a mock bow: 'Gentlemen, permit me to introduce to you my *fiancée*, Mrs. Charles Somerset that is to be.'

Absurd as the situation was, Annie did not seem displeased; she was far too unsophisticated, indeed,

to be conscious of any *bêtise* in such an introduction. Bufton, however, looked serious, and Leroy, who knew vaguely of the other engagement, seemed rather uncomfortable.

‘So you’ve settled it that way, have you?’ Bufton remarked dryly. ‘Then it’s too late, I suppose, to offer you any good advice?’

‘Much too late,’ responded Somerset, laughing. ‘Isn’t it, Annie?’

Annie smiled. She was far too happy to contradict him. They chatted together a little longer, and then Somerset volunteered to see the ladies home. They went off in high spirits, even Bess being quite gay and delighted.

Left alone together, Bufton and Leroy looked at each other.

‘Well, what do you think?’ demanded the cynic.

‘I think,’ said Leroy, ‘that the young lady——’

‘She isn’t a young lady,’ growled the other; ‘she’s a young savage! She was snatched from the sea by a common sailor, whom she afterwards married, and she has lived all her life among seaweeds and salt water.’

‘Wherever she has lived,’ said Leroy mildly, ‘I’m sure she has a beautiful nature. Surely you don’t despise her because, as you suggest, she is of lowly birth?’

Buften smiled sardonically.

‘Did you not notice her face?’ he asked.

‘I did indeed, and I don’t remember ever having seen a face more lovely.’

‘It’s the face of a woman who will stand no nonsense, my friend. Quiet enough now, with the sunshine on it, but with the devil’s own tempests waiting below. It would need a strong man to master that girl’s spirit, if ever the storm rose and the wind began to blow.’

‘I trust that the sunshine will continue,’ said Leroy. ‘She deserves to be happy, she seems so trustful and affectionate.’

‘And what about *him*?’ demanded Buften. ‘The young snob has managed to make one woman miserable, and he’s quite capable of playing the same trick on another. He ought to have married his cousin. She’d taken his measure, and had no insane notions about his character. This girl thinks him an angel in a top-hat, and if she ever discovers what he really is, look out for thunder!’

Meantime Annie, leaning on her lover’s arm, with Bess walking meekly by her side, was proceeding leisurely towards her abode in Bloomsbury. Her face was radiant, her eyes full of youthful happiness. London was Fairyland at last, for her Prince Charming had claimed her, and all the

world was enchanted. The dismal streets were full of sweet music; the sky above seemed all brightness. She seemed to be lifted up over all the troubles of life, and to be walking on air.

So absorbed was she in looking at her companion, and in listening to his tender words, that she did not notice the figure of a man which emerged from a side street, started on seeing her face, and then stood looking after her. The man was dressed like a seaman, in a suit of rough serge, and his whole appearance was strange and foreign. He was short, but powerfully built, with broad shoulders and narrow hips; his jet-black hair and beard were sprinkled with gray, and his wild, weather-beaten features were worn and haggard, as if from recent illness. There were tattoo-marks on his large muscular hands, and heavy earrings in his ears.

He stood gazing after her quietly for some moments, then he followed her slowly at a distance, with a curious smile upon his face.

The man's smile darkened more than once into a frown as he watched the young couple talking merrily together, and Annie clinging closely to the arm of her escort, with her face turned eagerly to his. As they entered the more busy thoroughfares, the crowd of foot-passengers coming and going hid them momentarily from view, but the man, though

he kept always at a respectful distance, never quite lost sight of them until they halted in front of the hotel in Bloomsbury, and stood outside the door talking together.

He paused then at the corner of the street, partially hidden from view, and peering at the distant figures.

The frown on his face grew black as night when he saw Annie and the young man shake hands, and draw close together for a moment for a parting kiss. Then the girl and her companion entered the house, and the young man came smiling up the street.

Wholly unsuspecting that anyone was taking an interest in his proceedings, Somerset approached the spot where the man was standing. For a moment the man seemed about to turn away and avoid him, but after hesitating, he left his place of ambush, and swaggered with a scowl towards Somerset. The two came face to face, and their eyes met.

Somerset had lit a cigar, and seemed in the seventh heaven of delight, his face shining, his eyes sparkling, his head held proudly erect. So full was he of his own happiness that he scarcely noticed the wild, hungry eyes that looked after him, or the fierce, restless hands that fingered the sailor's belt as if feeling for a knife. He passed by.

The man turned and watched him go ; then, after a long, baleful gaze, turned and walked down the street, towards the house in which Annie had disappeared.

A man who was possibly close on forty years of age, but who might have been years older ; for his black beard and hair were thickly strewn with gray, his face was deeply lined, and on his forehead and temples there were great dark veins. A noticeable man anywhere, but more than commonly noticeable in the London streets ; clearly a seafarer, weather-beaten, and worn with exposure to the elements. He had a curious panther-like walk, as if he were barefooted, and the movements of his slouching figure were suggestive at once of swiftness and of silence. His black eyes gleamed dangerously—clearly an ugly man to encounter when his blood was up.

The street was very quiet, and the man had the pavement to himself, as he walked or rather slouched past Tenterden's with his hat drawn over his face and his hands in the pockets of his sailor's jacket. He glanced at the door, over which, on a sheet of glass, were the words 'Tenterden's Hotel'; then he peered into the windows of the rooms on the ground floor, but he passed without pausing or looking back. After walking some fifty yards, however, he turned and passed the house again.

Twice or thrice he repeated this proceeding, hesitating each time that he passed the door, and on each of these occasions his swarthy face was dark and troubled. At last, after halting at the street-corner and looking wistfully at the house, he turned away and moved, still with the stealthy, slouching motion peculiar to him, in the direction of Tottenham Court Road.

Reaching that busy thoroughfare, he drifted this way and that for some time, as if uncertain what to do or whither to go. He stood musing at street-corners, looked with a vacant gaze into the shops, as if all he saw and heard was strange to him—as indeed it was. At last, turning into a side-street, he found a dismal-looking and dingy coffee-house, with a card in the window intimating that beds could be had within. He entered, and sat down at a table in one of the compartments. The place was empty, but in answer to his rap on the dirty table, a man in his shirt-sleeves appeared.

‘Are you the landlord, mate?’ asked the sailor, in a deep, hoarse voice.

The other nodded, and looked suspiciously at his customer.

‘Can I have a berth here to-night, mate?’ demanded the sailor.

The landlord hesitated. He was a thin, foxy-

looking person, with the eyes of a weasel, and, in all likelihood, with a weasel's predatory instincts.

'I don't know, mate,' he muttered; 'you're a seafaring man, ain't ye?'

'I ain't a —— beachcomber, if that's what you mean!' snarled the sailor, showing his white teeth and flashing his eyes.

'No offence, mate. Of course you can have a bed if you want one. Can I get you anything to take?'

'Bring me a cup of coffee and a biscuit,' was the reply.

The landlord disappeared, and returning presently with the refreshment asked for, lingered as if for payment. The sailor thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and, drawing forth a handful of sovereigns, threw one of the shining pieces on the table.

'Take it out o' that,' he said.

The landlord still lingered, fascinated by the money which he had seen.

'Stranger in London?' he said, more deferentially.

'Ay,' answered the sailor, nodding and gulping down a mouthful of hot coffee.

'Been long ashore?' was the next query.

'Three days or thereabouts. I slept last night

down Wapping way, and my traps are there. I've a pal hereabouts. I shan't go back to-night.'

Still very curious and interested, the landlord continued to hang about his customer, throwing out fragments of conversation, to which the stranger, munching his biscuit and drinking his coffee, replied in monosyllables. It was clear that the sailor, though not averse to society, was sudden and quick of temper, and inclined to resent familiarities ; but before long the art of the Cockney prevailed, and the two men sat opposite to each other, exchanging confidences. The landlord, by a series of leading questions, soon discovered that his customer had been living for a long time beyond seas, and had acquired a considerable amount of wealth in the Californian gold diggings. He appeared to have no friends or relations in London, and to be there on a visit of curiosity, without any particular object or destination ; for he said nothing to his new acquaintance about his chance encounter with our heroine in the streets of Bloomsbury.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN FROM THE SEA.

AFTER parting with her lover at the house door, and making an appointment with him for the next afternoon, Annie was in the seventh heaven of delight ; all the nervous apprehension she had once felt had departed in the bright blaze of her new happiness. She hugged and kissed her friend the little dressmaker ; she laughed, she sang aloud with a buoyancy and abandon that fairly astounded Mrs. Major Garthorne ; and that evening at the dinner-table, surrounded by the admiring members of the Tenterden circle, and dressed like a duchess in the prettiest evening costume she possessed, she fairly gave way to merriment. When she retired to rest her heart was still bounding joyfully, as if to the sound of wedding bells.

The next morning she rose early, and after breakfast was over, put on a sealskin jacket and hat to

match, and announced that she was going out for a walk. Bess volunteered to accompany her, while Mrs. Garthorne suggested that they should go together in the carriage, but Annie informed them with a happy smile that she would rather go forth alone.

‘I want to be by myself,’ she said. ‘I don’t want anyone to talk to, or to talk to me. I shall be back to lunch, if I’m not run away with or run over.’

So saying, she tripped downstairs and into the street. It was fine, clear wintry weather, and the sun was shining almost brightly through the clouds of Bloomsbury, as she made her way northward, reached the Euston Road, and then turned westward in the direction of Regent’s Park. Instinct guided her in that direction, for she was very fond of the park, but on the present occasion she was too full of her own pleasant thoughts to mind much whither she was going. All she knew was that the day was fine, her spirits high, the blood flowing gladly in her veins. So full did the dark city seem of music, that it might have been alive with singing birds.

She walked with a light elastic step, as she had walked on the lonely flats of Canvey Island. She would have sung aloud, only she felt that if she did so the people might wonder. For the rest,

she was in Dreamland, too full of her own sweet thoughts to notice the houses or the shops, or the clattering vehicles, or the faces that passed by. Almost before she knew, she had entered the park gate, and was wandering up the main avenue in the direction of the Zoological Gardens.

The place was very quiet. Here and there was a nursery maid wheeling a perambulator, and here and there a few playing children. She walked on and on, and found herself at last, after passing over the open space to the right of the park, standing and looking at the ornamental water near to the Western Gate.

She sat down on a seat and mused, gazing at the water. It was sparkling in the winter sunshine, and everywhere upon it the aquatic fowl were busy. The cry of a tame brent goose from one of the tiny islands reminded her of Canvey, and when a pair of ducks sped quacking by, high over her head, and alighted with a splash on a distant part of the lake, she was transformed in imagination to the lonely flats and marshes at the mouth of the Thames. She was a girl again, amid the loneliness of sky and water ; London, with its sights and sounds, had faded utterly away. And yet, though it was still the old life, it was different, for Heaven had opened, and something bright and beautiful, the vision of her dreams, had descended.

What more did she want in all the world, now he had told her that he loved her, and had avowed in the presence of his friends that he had chosen her to be his wife? She recalled the scene at the studio, and laughed as she thought of Bufton's stupefaction. She had no need to dread any change in her lover that might come of later knowledge, for he knew—she herself had told him—the story of her life.

Remembering this, her thoughts turned back quite gently to the man who had been to her a kind of foster-father. After all, he had not destroyed her happiness; rather, he had created it. She owed him everything, even perhaps the love of her Prince Charming; and he had done her the last supreme service of all, by passing out of her life as mysteriously as he had entered it long, long ago.

The park was almost deserted at that early hour. So still and quiet was it that she might have imagined herself seated on the sea-wall at Canvey and listening to the sea. A pair of black swans came to the water's edge and looked at her; she gazed at them smilingly, absorbed in her own thoughts.

So rapt was she in pleasant meditation that she did not notice a stealthy figure moving quietly towards her over the grass behind her seat. It

had followed her like a shadow from the moment when she had left the door of Tenterden's; quiet, tenacious, like an animal pursuing its quarry and certain of securing it, it had crept behind her through the streets. When she had entered the park, it had followed behind her still, at a greater distance, and for some minutes it had been standing watching her, partly hidden by a clump of trees. The figure of a man in sailor's costume, with tattoo marks on his hands and heavy rings in his ears—the man who had seen and followed her on the previous day.

He was now approaching her swiftly, with that curious, easy motion of one who is barefooted. In another moment he was close to her side and looking down at her. She started, looked round, and met his eyes; at the same moment she heard his voice:

‘Annie! Anniedromedy!’

She leaped to her feet and would have screamed, only something like a cold hand gripped her heart and seemed to stifle her. Ghastly pale, she tottered and shrank back, looking at him in horror, while he made a movement as if to take her in his arms, then, hesitating, stood smiling awkwardly at her, his white teeth gleaming, his black eyes full of wistful admiration.

‘Anniedromedy!’ he repeated. ‘My gel—my

little gel! My little lady! Don't ye know me? It's me—Matt Watson!

How dark and horrible the world grew! It was as if a black cloud had passed suddenly over the sun, veiling the happy light. She stood fascinated, shrinking and shuddering, unable to believe the evidence of her eyes; then, with a faint gasping cry, she sank half swooning on the seat.

Something in her look, her manner, seemed to trouble him. She seemed so different, too, from the girl he had left behind him. She was so fair and delicate, so elegantly dressed. But his hesitation only lasted for a moment. With a low laugh he threw himself on the seat by her side, and throwing his arm round her, drew her to him. She moaned and tried to release herself, but he held her firmly. She could feel his heavy breath upon her.

'I've startled ye, Anniedromedy. But don't you be afeared. It's me right enough, come home at last! Come, let me look at ye, my dear—let me look at the little gel I've made a lady on. I should ha' knowed ye anywheres—ay, in a shipload o' people. I knowed ye the minute I saw ye in the street!'

'Let me go!' she cried. 'Don't touch me! Don't speak to me! O God, it can't be you!'

He released her in a moment, and sat gazing at her with a strange, wistful light on his dark, sun-tanned face.

‘It’s me right enough, my gel,’ he said quietly.

‘I thought—I thought you were dead.’

‘I was near it, Anniedromedy,’ he replied. ‘Many and many a long watch I lay out yonder in Californy, and they thought once that I’d slipped my cable. But I thought of you a-waiting for me here in England, and I was worth a dozen dead uns! My gel! My lady! I’ve come back! I landed three days ago at Gravesend, and here I am!’

Horried, fascinated, she turned her face towards him at last, and looked at him in wondering terror. Yes, it was real! He was older and more worn-looking, but in other respects he was unchanged. She remembered the weather-beaten face, the great eager eyes, the savage mouth, the earrings, the tattoo marks on the powerful hands. How often had she pictured them to herself during the years that he had been away!

He drew a pouch from his pocket, and taking out a piece of negro-head tobacco, cut off a piece with a large sailor’s knife, then, as he closed the knife and put the quid into his mouth, he said:

‘You don’t seem over glad to see me, neither. Maybe because you’re a lady now, and I’m a bit

rough-and-ready. Well, it's my fault, my gel. I should ha' warned you as I was coming. But I'd a notion to give you a surprise like. Well, well, won't ye shake hands, my dear, and tell me ye ain't sorry I'm come back?'

What could she do? She reached out her hand timidly. He seized it with both his hands, and held it firmly but gently, gazing eagerly at her. His eyes were full of tears.

'I never thought to see ye again, my lass,' he murmured in a broken voice. 'I thought I was booked for "kingdom come," and all my thought then was for my little gel at home. I did the right thing by ye, didn't I, Anniedromedy? I sent ye all I had in gold and dollars, and when I lay a-dying, I made over everything to the little gel at home. "Mind," says I, "she gets it all—gold and land, stock and dollars. Her name's Anniedromedy Watson," says I, "and she lives with old Job Endell on Canvey Island. She's my wife," says I—"my little wife as I married in Gravesend before I come away last voyage." And they took it down, and they made it all right accordin' to law, and I signed my name to it afore witnesses: "Matt Watson, Englishman—his last will and testament afore he goes to face his God."''

She listened, shuddering. Every word he

uttered was like a knife-point thrust into her heart. When he uttered the word 'wife' her horror and repulsion almost stifled her, but she continued to look at him with eyes wide open and lips apart. His face brightened, and, forcing a nervous laugh, he continued:

'But it's all right now, Anniedromedy. I didn't die that journey, but I got up dazed and stupid, like a chap as has been lying drowned at the bottom of the sea. It was many a long day afore I was fit to travel, and 'twas a long road, many a day's journey up among the mountains, and I'd to sell out my claim, and what they calls "realize my property," afore I started for home. Well, I done it at last—I done it, and come away a rich man, with more money for my little gel than ever she can spend; and now I'm here, there's nothing she shan't have that money can get for her all the days of her life. I kept it for her, and it's hers to spend. Yes, it's yours, Anniedromedy; so you needn't be afraid but I'll keep ye a lady still.'

'How did you know I was here?' she asked faintly.

'Why, I waited for ye outside all the morning,' he replied, smiling; 'and then I followed ye, my dear.'

'I mean in London. How did you know I was in London?'

‘Why, this ways,’ answered the sailor. ‘Moment I landed I went down river to Canvey Island, and found old Job and the missis. When they see me they thought I was a ghost! But I up and cries to them, “Where’s my Annie?” And then they told me you was living in London, and enjoying of yourself; and old Job was for coming with me to search for ye. But I laughed, and I says to him, “You leave that to me, mate; I’ll find her out myself, and give her a surprise,” says I; and I thinks to myself, “I’ll take a look at her first on the sly, and not let on as I’m alive.” And the night afore last I waited outside the house, and wondered if I should knock at the door and ask for my little gel; but I peeped through the window, and see you sitting and smiling in fine clothes among your swell friends, and thinks I to myself, “There’s no hurry; I’ll wait a bit.” Then yesterday I see you in the street, though you didn’t see me—you was too busy talking with a gentleman. Yes, you was a-laughing and a-talking, but I was follering behind you all the time.’

He still held her hand, and his grip tightened, while the wistful expression on his face suddenly changed to one of fierce suspicion. Drawing her towards him, and looking full into her eyes, he said:

‘There’s one thing I’m a-going to ask my gel : who was the gentleman you was a-talking to yesterday?’

She tried to release her hand, but he held it firmly.

‘A friend,’ she said.

‘A friend?’ he echoed. ‘Well, that’s right enough ; but afore you parted, my gel, he kissed you, as if he’d been your brother. He kissed you on the cheek, Anniedromedy. Maybe that’s the fashion among the fine folk here in London, and if so I’ve no call to say anything about it ; but I want ye to tell me, fair and square, why he done it?’

The sudden question and the keen look which accompanied it seemed to break the spell which had hitherto held her. Her own face darkened, and the black line of her eyebrows, always so evident in moments of passion, gathered suddenly. With a sudden movement and an exclamation she tore herself free, and sprang frowning to her feet.

He did not rise, but kept his eyes fixed upon her, while he shot a stream of tobacco juice from between his teeth.

‘There’s no call to be angry, my gel,’ he said quietly. ‘I ain’t angry *yet*. But you’ve got to tell me, fair and square again, who that friend of

yourn is, and why he kissed ye when you shook hands.'

She turned away with a slight hysterical laugh.

'That's my business,' she said nervously. 'I'm not afraid of you or any man, Matt Watson! The gentleman's a friend of mine—that's all.'

'Does he know you're a wedded woman, Annie-dromedy?' asked the sailor, still very quietly.

'I'm not!' cried Annie.

'You're my wife, Anniedromedy! We was married in Gravesend afore I went away!'

'A marriage like that doesn't count,' she murmured.

'Don't it, by ——!' cried the man, rising and showing his white teeth. 'Then if it don't, we will have one that does count right away. Don't be afeared,' he continued, seeing her shrink as it from a blow; 'I ain't angry, I tell ye—I'm too downright glad to see my little gel again. And I don't blame ye neither, if maybe ye thought I was dead and buried, and wouldn't never come back. But here I am, and here I'm agoing to stay; and you're my wife—Anniedromedy Watson, as was married to me in church afore witnesses, and the man ain't born as shall come between you and me!'

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPELL IS BROKEN.

IT was true, then. The sea had yielded up its dead. What Annie most dreaded and hated had come to pass. At the very moment when heaven had seemed to open, and when all the world had seemed full of the music and joy of fairyland, the solid earth had yielded beneath her feet, revealing gulfs of utter shame and darkness. Yet her heart had not broken ; all she seemed to feel was a horrid fascination and stupefaction. She breathed, she moved, she still existed, but everything had changed. She was no longer a lady, happy and beloved, she was again the waif from the Sea, conscious only of utter loneliness and desolation.

As she looked at the man her horror grew. How different he was to the lover of her girlish fancy ! Coarse, savage, hideous even, yet showing in every

look and gesture the strangest devotion and admiration. She would have loathed him less, indeed, if he had been less gentle. The wistful tenderness in his face, the gentle, almost pitiful respect that lay behind his roughest words, sickened her. It was clear that he felt, in some dim fashion, that she had withdrawn herself partially out of his sphere—that she was a lady indeed, and he only a rough, common man.

And after all he was her benefactor. He had saved her from the Sea—he had sacrificed himself year after year to secure her happiness, and even when he had lain under the very shadow of Death his only thought had been of her. It was wrong and wicked, therefore, to hate him so much ; but she could not help it. He seemed to her like some fabulous monster, slimy and dreadful and foul. His coarse, rough speech, the horrid tattoo marks on his hands, his breath, his manner of rolling the tobacco between his cheeks and spitting on the ground, were all horrible to her. She felt for him now what she remembered to have always felt, even when she was a child—a sickening physical repulsion. And to think that the man loved her, and was actually, in the eyes of the law, her husband !

She had thought herself a lady ; all her instincts, indeed, had been, ever since she could remember,

towards what was refined and elegant and gentle. She had always hated common people, and had never felt much sympathy for even virtue, when it was coarse and vulgar. Somerset himself had first fascinated her because he was a gentleman, refined and cultivated to the finger-tips. She loved his white hands, his honeyed breath, his dudish airs and graces, the refinement and elegance of the very clothes he wore. She remembered how, at Canvey, she had found a pocket-handkerchief of his, silken and scented, and how she had held it to her nostrils for hours in secret, inhaling the perfume as if it were his breath.

Then the time had come when all her dreams could be realized, and she, too, could be elegant and refined, and meet with people who were educated and soft-spoken, and wear beautiful raiment, and forget that she had ever been coarse and common. How she had loved to clothe herself in softness, and to have dainty under-clothing, and to feel the shimmer of silk and satin around her, and to go among the lights and the music like a lady indeed ! That was the only life she had cared for, and to crown all she was to have shared that life with her Prince Charming, in the Fairyland of soft speech and gentle breeding.

And now, to think of it ! The good fortune which came to her out of the clouds, the money

she possessed, the very clothes she wore, were not her own at all—they were his, the savage man's who had arisen before her like a monster from the sea. She possessed nothing of her own—not even a name! She was Matt Watson's wife, the wife of a man who was as coarse and common and horrible as some unclean creature crawling among the ooze of the seashore.

What was most horrible about it all was that the man cared for her so deeply, and opposed to her own physical repulsion, moreover, a silent and overmastering passion. Every look he cast at her, every smile of the mouth and eyes, betokened this. He was tamed and subdued, as animals are so often, by the sexual attraction. Had it been otherwise she might have felt less helpless. She might even have appealed to him, and persuaded him to go his way, break the bond between them, and leave her in peace. She felt already, with a woman's instinct, that this was precisely what he would never consent to do.

They walked along side by side on the margin of the lake. Gradually her strength was coming back to her, and she began asking herself how she could temporize until she had decided how to act. From time to time she glanced at her companion, and noticed that his face looked almost happy. He appeared quite content to accompany her

silently, soothed by the mere physical fact of her presence.

‘Matt,’ she said at last.

His eyes brightened as she named him.

‘Well, my dear?’ he answered gently.

‘Don’t mind what I said to you just now. I was startled and frightened; you came upon me so suddenly. I’m glad, very glad, to see you, for you’ve always been good to me, as good to me as if you’d been my own father.’

He nodded a little doubtfully, and watched her thoughtfully as she walked on. After a little time she spoke again.

‘You’ve seen no one since you came to London? I mean you’ve told no one about—about *me*?’

‘No, Anniedromedy,’ was the reply; ‘there was no one I could tell even if I wanted. Job and the missis are the only folk I know in England.’

‘Where are you living?’

‘I’d a berth last night in a coffee-house off Tottenham Court Road. I left my traps in Wapping. I’ve heaps of things for you, my gel, and the missis is taking charge of some of them.’

‘What do you mean to do?’

‘That’s for you to settle,’ the man replied. ‘I know you’re enjoying of yourself, and I don’t want to interrupt. I’ll bide your time, my dear. As

soon as you're ready we can settle down somewhere comfortable, but there ain't no hurry.'

It was clear that he took it for granted that she would join him, and that they would live together. The black line of her eyebrows darkened, as with face averted she answered :

'I want you to do me a favour, Matt.'

'Ay, ay.'

'Don't tell anyone yet about me. Wait a few days, and don't come to the house where I'm living. They're strange people, and very proud.'

'I see,' said Matt, with a scowl. 'Well, just as you please ; only remember, my gel, I haven't seen ye all these long years.'

'I'll meet you again in the same place to-morrow,' returned Annie quickly. 'I want to go home now and to think it over. You see, it all seems so strange. I never thought you'd come back.'

'Are ye sorry I come?' he asked huskily, spitting on the ground.

'No, of course I'm not sorry ; only it makes everything so different. Everyone will have to know in time, but not yet. In a day or two perhaps—but there, we'll see.'

'All right,' said the sailor. 'I ain't quite strong yet, and I shan't be rightly better till I'm berthed comfortable, with my little wife beside me. Look

here, Anniedromedy, my luck's been wonderful out yonder, and the money's all yourn. You'll have a splendid time, if money can buy it for you; it's all yourn to spend, as I told ye—all yourn to spend.'

They crossed the open park together and reached the central avenue. There Annie paused and held out her hand.

'Please don't come any further,' she said. 'I'll meet you at the same time to-morrow.'

'Down yonder by the water?'

'Yes.'

'Let me take one more look at you before you go,' cried Matt, holding her hand. 'My beauty! My lady!'

'Don't! You'll be seen!' she cried, as he drew her towards him.

He laughed.

'Well, if they do—a man's a right to kiss his own wife, hasn't he?' And he threw his strong arms round her and kissed her in spite of her resistance. Pale as death, she shook herself free, then, looking back at him, said in a low voice:

'To-morrow!'

He laughed and nodded, as she flew rather than walked down the avenue, while he stood and watched her. Only for a moment, however, did

he pause ; in another minute he had overtaken her. He cried as she paused trembling :

‘Just another word, my dear, afore you go. Answer me fair and square. There’s nothing, is there, atween you and that young chap I see you a-talking to yesterday? Come, out with it, honest !’

‘Of course there is nothing,’ she answered, almost angrily. ‘Why should you think so?’

‘I *don’t* think so, Anniedromedy,’ he replied, showing his white teeth and feeling for the sailor’s knife in his belt. ‘God help him if I did, for I’d have his life!’

The next moment she had escaped, speeding down the avenue like a lapwing and never once looking behind her. He watched her quietly with a grim smile of admiration till she disappeared.

Out from the park and through the busy streets she made her weary way, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her soul in a tumult, and ever as she went she seemed to hear the sound of his footsteps behind her. Terror and despair kept her strong, or she would have fainted in the open street. All her thought now, however, was to reach the house where she lodged, and to hide herself away from everybody, and to think it all over. At last, panting and trembling, she reached the hotel,

knocked and was admitted, and ran swiftly to the little sitting-room upstairs.

Bess was seated by the window, sewing. As Annie entered she looked up eagerly.

‘Why, Annie, wherever have you been?’ she cried. ‘I was growing quite frightened—I was afraid——’

She paused, for Annie stood looking at her wildly, with dilated eyes, her cheeks streaming with tears.

‘What’s the matter, Annie dear? Are you ill?’

Annie made no reply, but gave a low, hysterical sob, between a laugh and a cry; then, clutching at the air, fell back upon the carpet in a dead swoon.

Bess was by Annie’s side in a moment, kneeling by her, supporting her head, and chafing her hands, which were cold as ice. For some minutes she lay as dead, and the little dressmaker was terribly frightened; but at last she began to recover consciousness, sharp, spasmodic thrills ran through her frame, and she moaned wearily as if in pain. There was nothing for it but to get her to bed as soon as possible, and this Bess did, undressing her deftly and soothing her with gentle words; but when she questioned her, Annie only shook her head and motioned her to be silent. Fortunately, tears came at last to relieve her—

great silent tears that swelled up from her overburdened heart.

‘Go away, Bess dear,’ she sobbed, ‘and don’t let anyone else come near me. It’s nothing—I shall be all right to-morrow;’ and Bess, always obedient, presently withdrew, not, however, without much compunction and sad conjecture.

Left alone in the darkness, Annie lay in silence, thinking it all over, and the more that she thought, the more strange and incomprehensible it all seemed. Shame and terror possessed her—shame at the revelation which was bound to ensue, terror at what might happen in the near future; for come what might, she was determined that she would never yield to Matt Watson’s demand and entreaties, and unite her lot to his. The very thought nearly drove her mad. She still felt with horror his kiss upon her mouth, a kiss so different from the sweet, gentle, soul-compelling kiss of the man she loved. Another such kiss, she thought, would kill her. Well, if that were all, there would be a way out of the trouble—she would die; but, alas! she knew that she was young and strong, and that life ran too powerfully in her veins to be destroyed even by what she dreaded most.

All night she lay awake, and at last, when the cold gray light of the winter morning was creeping

into the room, she fell into a troubled sleep. When she awoke again she found it was broad day, and that Bess was seated by her side.

At the sight of her little friend she felt the warm tears welling up from her heart again, and reaching out her arms with a piteous cry, she sobbed :

‘Oh, Bess, Bess! what shall I do? What shall I do?’

‘What is it, dear?’ asked Bess eagerly. ‘Something has happened! Tell me; perhaps I can help you. Is it about Mr. Somerset? Have you quarrelled? Has he told you that he must marry his cousin after all?’

Annie looked at her vacantly, and began to moan hysterically.

‘Don’t, Annie, don’t! I can’t bear to see you doing that! Tell me your trouble, do!’

Suddenly drying her tears and shaking back her hair, which hung loose upon her shoulders, Annie sat up in bed, gripping Bess by the wrist and looking wildly into her face.

‘Do you remember,’ she cried in a low voice, ‘the sermon the Vicar preached once at Rayleigh, about the Sea giving up its dead? I thought it foolish then, thinking in my heart that the dead never came back to life. But they do—they do! And I might have known it by my dream—the

dream I told you the day after Mr. Somerset was here. O God, why didn't I die long since! Why didn't the water drown me when I was down on Canvey, dreading and fearing that he'd come back!

Then in hurried whispers she told her friend of Matt's return—of how he had followed her the previous day, and how they had met in Regent's Park. Poor Bess began to share her terror, though she could not quite understand the sickening horror with which this man's very presence filled poor Annie. Bess was a simple country girl, brought up to respect the conventions and to regard marriage as the holiest of sacraments, not to be broken under any circumstances whatever. Matt Watson was Annie's husband, married to her in church; and moreover, he had been her friend and benefactor all her life. Naturally enough he had come to claim her, and who had the better right? She hinted her thoughts as broadly as she dared, but the moment she did so Annie turned upon her like a mad thing, and lost all self-control.

'I hate him! I hate him!' she cried. 'Can't you understand that? And the more he cares for me the more I hate him! His face sickens me, his touch burns me; if he kissed me again, I should kill him, Bess! All my life, ever since I


remember, I've felt the same. And I love Mr. Somerset as much as I hate Matt Watson. I'd rather be his servant or his dog, though he only threw me a crust to eat, than Matt Watson's wife, though I was richer than a queen. Don't you understand—don't you understand?'

Bess did not understand at all. She was shocked to the heart's core that Annie, whom she adored, should have such awful thoughts. But she offered some commonplace consolation, nevertheless.

'Perhaps, dear,' she said, 'you won't always feel like this. It's the shock of it all, the surprise. When you and your husband are better friends, and everything is explained——'

'Do you think I'll ever live with him?' cried Annie, livid and trembling. 'Do you think I'll ever let him touch me or come near me? I'll kill him first, as I said, or make him kill me! Oh, I'm not afraid of him! He shall see! I'll show him how I hate him—how I wish he'd been dead and buried; and then, when I've raised the devil in him, he may strangle or stab me for all I care!'

Presently she grew calmer, and, in spite of Bess's entreaties, began to dress. The storm of angry passion had secured at least one purpose—it had aroused all the strength and determination latent in her nature, and saved her perhaps from



utter physical collapse. She chose the plainest of her dresses, and put it on without a glance at the mirror. Bess did up her hair.

‘All I’ve got belongs to him,’ said Annie, ‘and I shan’t keep anything ; it wouldn’t be right, feeling about him as I do. I’m not going to wear his clothes and eat his bread ; and you, you’ll have to get a place in London, or go back to Rayleigh.’

‘Don’t think about me,’ said Bess ; ‘I shall be all right. I can always earn my living by my needle.’

‘Oh, Bess, I’m so sorry !’ said Annie, throwing her arms around her. ‘I brought you away, and made you think that I was rich. Will you ever forgive me?’

Bess’s only answer was a loving kiss.

‘You won’t do anything rash or foolish?’ pleaded the little dressmaker. ‘Think it well over before you decide. And remember, dear, it isn’t altogether your husband’s fault. How could he ever guess that you’d feel towards him as you do? If he’s coarse and common, as you say, he isn’t to blame, and he has proved—now hasn’t he?—that he loves you very dearly.’

‘Yes, that’s the worst of it,’ replied Annie wearily.

‘You must think, too, what you will say to

Mr. Somerset. Of course you'll have to tell him he mustn't think about you any more.'

Annie did not reply, but her face went scarlet, and her eyebrows met ominously over her stormy eyes. Presently she seized her hat and cloak, and intimated that she was going out. Bess entreated her to remain at home and rest.

'Besides, you haven't had any breakfast. Let me fetch you some before you go.'

'I can't eat,' returned Annie; 'the food would choke me.'

But she was at last persuaded to drink a cup of tea, which Bess fetched for her from below. Then Bess begged and implored to be allowed to accompany her; but Annie set her lips firmly together, and shook her head.

'But where are you going, dear?'

'I'm going to see him,' was the reply.

'Your husband?'

'No, Mr. Somerset,' replied Annie, with a strange laugh. 'I shall find him round at the studio perhaps. The sooner he knows the better. He is sure to be coming here, and I don't want him to come here any more.'

By this time she seemed quite calm, but her friend had no suspicion of the reason. She left the house immediately, and hurried away. Bess watched her from the window until she disappeared.

you, and she will have her share of her mother's fortune.'

'Too late, mother,' answered Charles, striding up and down the room. 'I have pledged myself to another woman.'

'Who is she? Where did you meet her? What is her name?' questioned his mother angrily.

'Her name is Annie Watson, and I met her last summer in the country.'

'Is she a lady?'

'The very question Ethel put to me,' replied Somerset, forcing a laugh. 'Well, I suppose so. At any rate, she's the dearest, sweetest, prettiest little woman in all the world, and directly I bring her to see you——'

'I forbid you to do so! I will never meet her.'

'Nonsense, mother! you've no right to judge her so harshly. I should never have been happy with Ethel, or Ethel with me; whereas with my darling Annie——'

'Some vulgar country girl! some common creature, with only good looks to recommend her! Well, as you please. You'll be sorry some day for your folly. Such heartless conduct is certain to be punished, and this girl, whom you have picked up Heaven knows where——'

'Has only one fault, mother,' laughed the young man. 'I'm afraid she's a widow.'

Mrs. Somerset gasped in mingled amazement and horror.

‘You’re afraid she’s a widow! Good heavens! don’t you even *know* what she is?’

‘Well, then, she is a widow. She was married many years ago to a man with whom she never lived, but who left her to go on a long voyage on the very day they were married. He died the other day, leaving her a heap of money.’

As the explanation proceeded, the widow grew more and more aghast, and her storm of protest yielded to a flood of angry tears. Gradually, by skilful questionings, she contrived to elicit the whole story of her son’s acquaintance with the girl of Canvey Island, and when she had done so her indignation knew no bounds.

‘I was right, then,’ she cried. ‘An uneducated fisher-girl, without even a name of her own! A common sailor’s cast-off wife! And you would actually marry her! What did I tell you! You are simply raving mad!’

It would be useless to prolong the report of the conversation, which went through the usual phases of domestic disputes—threats, entreaties, protests, and sneers. After an hour’s discussion mother and son parted on very bad terms. Mrs. Somerset adhered to her determination of having nothing whatever to do with her son’s so-called *fiancée*,

and Somerset was just quitting the house in the very worst of tempers when a messenger arrived with a telegram addressed to him. He opened the telegram on the doorstep, and read as follows :

‘Come back here as soon as possible. You’re wanted.—BUFTON.’

Waving adieu to his mother, who stood pale and indignant at the open door, he strode away to the nearest cab-stand, chartered a hansom, and leaping in, ordered the cabman to drive to the studio. *En route* he asked himself what the telegram could mean. Possibly some small commission from a dealer who wanted to discuss terms with him. He did not for a moment connect the message with Annie. Full of annoyance at what he deemed his mother’s worldliness and want of sympathy, and of virtuous indignation at the general selfishness of society, he sat fuming and fretting as the hansom whirled away towards Bloomsbury.

Crossing Tottenham Court Road, his attention was suddenly attracted to a man who stood staring at him from the centre of the street, and almost succeeded in getting himself run over ; indeed, he would have been run over if he had not seized the horse’s head in his powerful hands and hurled

it aside, and forced the animal back almost on its haunches. A wild, weather-beaten man, who had tattoo marks on his hands and wore heavy rings in his ears. His eyes were still fixed intently on Somerset, as the driver with oaths lashed at him with his whip, and a crowd began to collect. Then he released the horse and stepped aside without a word.

The cabman drove on, and in a few minutes deposited Somerset close to the studio door.

‘Rum start that!’ said the driver, as he received his fare. ‘The man seemed to know you, sir. He stepped right into the road to look at you, and I nearly ran him down.’

‘I never saw him before,’ replied Somerset; ‘he looked like a sailor.’

‘Looked more like a lunatic, sir,’ said the cabman with a grin, as he drove off.

Fixed on the outer door of the studio, Somerset, to his surprise, found a scrap of paper, bearing the following words, in Bufton’s handwriting :

‘We’ve had to go out. Somebody’s waiting for you inside.’

He opened the door and entered. As he did so a woman, who sat waiting, rose to her feet and turned her face towards him.

‘Annie! You here!’ he cried, recognising her; then drawing back startled, as he became aware

that she was agitated and deadly pale, he added, 'How strange you look! Is anything the matter?'

She did not reply, but sank into a chair again, covering her eyes with her hands. He made a movement to bend over her and take her in his arms, but she drew one hand from her face and motioned him away.

'Annie, my darling,' he cried, 'for God's sake tell me what ails you! Why do I find you here?'

As he spoke she rose and looked at him. Her eyes were tearless, but the lids were swollen as if with weeping, her cheeks like alabaster.

'Did you mean what you said to me?' she demanded in a clear, unfaltering voice. 'Do you love me very much?'

'Oh, Annie, can you ask!' he cried, making another movement to embrace her. But she still motioned him back, and he noticed as she did so that her hands were bare and gloveless, and that her hair had fallen loose and was raining on her shoulders. Never, he thought, had she looked more beautiful. Yet her beauty was that of supreme piteousness and sorrow.

'Then swear to me,' she said, 'that you will not turn away from me, that you will still be my friend, whatever happens.'

'Of course,' he answered, more and more

amazed. 'Haven't I sworn to you that I love you? Have you not promised to become my wife?'

'I can never be your wife,' she answered, gazing at him steadfastly.

'Annie! what are you saying?'

In another moment she had sprung towards him, flung her arms round his neck, and was sobbing in his embrace.

'Love me! Love me!' she cried. 'Love me more than ever! Never mind what people say—never mind whether it's right or wrong—never mind anything! Love me! Love me, or I shall die!'

And swept away in the storm of her passionate emotion, she kissed him on the lips again and again. His head went round in mingled wonder and delight. He clasped her close to him, answering her kisses with kisses even more passionate, until, faint and trembling, she lay smiling in his embrace, her dark eyes seeking his, her heart fluttering against his own.

'Now tell me,' he whispered: 'what has happened?'

'You must promise, first.'

'What must I promise, Annie?'

'To hide me. To take me away abroad, far from here. I must go away from London. I must not remain another day.'

‘But why?’ he demanded, stupefied.

She hesitated for an instant, then replied, speaking quickly and impetuously, as if fearful of her own words:

‘Because what I dreaded most of all has come about. Because just as we were so happy they want to take me from you. I learned it only yesterday, and ever since I’ve been wondering what to do. At first I thought I would go away and never see you again; but afterwards I thought to myself, “Why should I be afraid? He loves me; he will save me.” Then I came to find you, and to tell you everything, and your friends were here, and when they saw that something was wrong, they tried to question me, but I told them that it was you I wanted to see, and you only—and they sent for you, and I waited till you came.’

‘But I don’t understand, my darling,’ said Somerset, more and more perplexed. ‘What is all the trouble?’

‘He is not dead!’ she cried, clinging to him as if dreading he might repulse her. ‘He has come back!’

‘Good God! Do you mean your husband?’

‘I have no husband. I have no one in the world but you.’

‘But the man you married when you were a child? That sailor who left you the money?’

She inclined her head, while her eyes filled again with tears.

‘He is alive, you say. How do you know that?’

‘I have seen him,’ she replied. ‘He has been following me for days. Yesterday he spoke to me, and made me promise to meet him again to-day.’

Suddenly a thought occurred to Somerset, and he asked eagerly :

‘What is the man like? Is he a wild-looking, bearded man, with rings in his ears? Very black complexioned, with hair and beard sprinkled with gray?’

She nodded again, still clinging to him.

‘Then I have seen him. My hansom nearly drove over him as I came here.’

And he described what had occurred. She listened quietly and then said :

‘That was Matt Watson. He has seen us together, and if he knew that we cared for each other, he would kill you. I am not afraid of him, but I’m afraid for you.’

Frowning nervously, the young man released himself gently from the arms that clung around him, and placing Annie in the chair where she had been sitting when he entered, began striding up and down the room. At last he paused and said, looking at her thoughtfully :

‘All this is horrible. It is like an earthquake opening under one’s feet. But we must try to be calm, to discuss it quietly, to ascertain what it is best to do.’

‘There is only one thing,’ replied the girl, ‘I must hide myself from him. I must go away.’

‘How long has he been in London?’

‘Two or three days.’

‘And what did he say to you? Did he ask you to join him?’

‘Yes—at least, he let me see that he expected me to go to him. I’ll never do it! I would rather die!’

Her tone was sadder and more despairing, for already something in her lover’s manner had chilled and startled her. She had expected more warmth, more sympathy, more readiness to fall in with her own mood. She could not fail to see, however, that her suggestion that they should escape together had awakened no enthusiasm.

Again he began striding up and down the floor, biting his lips and muttering to himself.

‘Do those fellows know anything about this?’ he asked presently.

‘Your friends? Oh no!’

‘So much the better. They’d only laugh at me. It’s a frightful complication. After all, you

see, you're married to this man, and he has a certain kind of claim over you.'

'No, no!' she cried, springing up. 'I tell you I hate him! I will never go back to him!'

'I hope you never will,' said Somerset; 'but it's the devil's own business. He looks an ugly fellow, and he has the right on his side. Well, there's only one way: you must keep him at arm's length until we arrange something.'

Her heart fell more and more. Instead of championing her eagerly, like a hot-headed young knight-errant, Somerset was offering her the usual platitudes of good advice, just as Bess had done. He looked more vexed than really sorrowful. Eager to sound the depths of his sympathy, she approached him again, and placed her arms round his neck—this time more quietly, with less loving confidence.

'You will keep your promise?' she murmured. 'You will save me? You will take me away?'

He kissed her gently on the forehead.

'My darling, do you know what you are asking? You are married to this man. If we went away together, what would be said of you?'

'Then you do not love me?'

'I love you too much to lead you into trouble and disgrace. No, I'm not quite such a cad as that!' he exclaimed magniloquently.

‘I want nothing in the world but you,’ she said, looking earnestly into his eyes. ‘I don’t care what people say about me. I don’t mind what happens so long as you love me and protect me.’

‘Don’t tempt me, Annie. Give me time to think. Perhaps I can find a way out of this.’

‘There’s no way but one,’ she replied, while the black line of her eyebrows darkened ominously. ‘If you don’t love me, I shall go away alone, and you will never see me again.’

‘But what could we do? I’m a poor man without a shilling but what I earn; my mother would not assist me.’

‘We could work,’ she said. ‘God would send us bread, and if not, we could starve together.’

‘If you remained in London, what would happen?’

‘I cannot remain,’ was the reply. ‘Everything I have is his—I could keep nothing! And every day he would be watching me—waiting and watching. He’s quiet enough now, for he thinks he has me safe; but if he knew that I would never go to him he would be very different. You don’t know him as I do. He’s like a wild beast when he’s angry. When I was a child he used to terrify me, and everybody was afraid of him.’

As she spoke Somerset remembered the wild figure he had seen in the street, with its fierce eyes

fixed on his, and he realized fully the danger of the situation. He was no coward, however, and under other circumstances he would have been ready to risk even greater peril for Annie's sake. But underneath this young fellow's gay veneer of Bohemianism there was latent a certain strong respect for public opinion ; nor were his views on moral questions either daring or original. He loved Annie very much, or had persuaded himself that he did so ; he had been quite ready and eager to unite his fortune to hers, even although she was a penniless girl ; but to take possession of another man's wife, and to throw his own future to the winds by an unprecedented act of folly, was quite another matter.

While he hesitated and pondered Annie watched him keenly. For the first time since they had met she had begun to doubt him. Why did he hesitate ? If he loved her, as he said, why did he not take her in his arms and bear her away to hiding, as she proposed ? You see, she was still a somewhat unsophisticated child of Nature. Society meant little to her beyond luxury, fine dresses, musical, pleasant company, and those she was ready to abandon instantly, greatly as she had learned to love them. She knew little or nothing of the conventional proprieties, or of Society's power to crush the individual into nothingness by simply

ignoring his or her existence. As yet no stones had been flung at her ; she did not even suspect that it was so common to throw stones.

‘You’d better go home now,’ said Somerset, at last. ‘I’ll think it all over, and come round to you in the evening.’

She looked at him in wonder.

‘I promised to meet him again this afternoon,’ she answered. ‘I won’t meet him! That’s why I’ve come to you. I want you to take me away.’

‘To-day? You must know that it is impossible! There, there,’ he added soothingly, ‘I am sure you exaggerate the difficulties of the situation. This wretched man cannot compel you to live with him against your will. The law will protect you.’

‘No one can protect me but you,’ she answered, turning away from him ; ‘and I see now that you won’t.’

‘My darling girl,’ he began, following her and putting his arm round her waist. She shook herself free in a moment, and faced him, panting and trembling.

‘If you loved me as you said,’ she cried, ‘you would not lose me! Do you think that if *you* were in trouble, if all the world was against you, I would have turned away from you? No! The wretcheder you were, the more I’d cling to you

and try to help you. I believe that if Matt Watson came in at that door, and tried to drag me away by force, you wouldn't have a word to say !'

He argued, protested, assured her of his devotion ; but he had shaken her faith in him, perhaps for ever. He was still talking to her earnestly, and she was listening wearily, when Bufton and Leroy walked in.

She held out her hand.

'Good-bye,' she said.

'I'm coming with you,' he whispered ; 'I'll see you home.'

Again she looked him in the face with a strange far-off expression which he did not understand.

'I'd rather go alone,' she said. 'I've to meet him again this afternoon.'

'Be careful what you say to him. Temporalize—persuade him to remain quiet. I'll come round in the evening.

'Don't come round till to-morrow,' she replied.

'Very well, I'll come round early to-morrow. You're sure you wouldn't like me to accompany you?' he asked.

She shook her head, and without even glancing at Bufton and Leroy, who stood quietly looking on, walked to the door. He followed her, and as they parted drew her gently towards him.

'My darling!' he said, offering to kiss her.

She held up her mouth to his, and her lips were like ice ; then, with another long look into his face, she turned and walked away.

He walked back into the studio, and with a groan of agony threw himself into a chair.

‘My God, my God!’ he murmured, ‘what a fatality!’ and his tears began to fall. His friends said nothing, but waited for him to speak, Leroy full of pitying sympathy, Bufton with a curious frown. At last he spoke out and told them everything, and as he did so his tears flowed and he seemed heart-broken.

Leroy, always tender-hearted, condoled with him sincerely ; but Bufton put on his working jacket, and began to paint.

‘It’s a terrible position for you,’ said Leroy gently. ‘My heart bleeds for you, Charlie; whatever is to be done?’

‘What can be done?’ cried Somerset wildly. ‘The man’s here and he’s her husband. He can claim her at any moment.’

Bufton, who was muttering to himself and uttering what sounded like imprecations, looked round from his canvas, and cocking his Cyclopean eye at Somerset, asked suddenly :

‘What did she want you to do?’

‘She wanted me to go away with her. Poor child! she was willing to sacrifice everything—

reputation, even life itself—for my sake. She is so simple-minded, so ignorant of the world !’

‘ Well, how did you answer her ?’ grunted the cynic.

‘ Of course I told her that it was madness. She implored and appealed, and didn’t seem to understand.’

Bufton dashed down his brush and palette, and turned fiercely on Somerset.

‘ You infernal cad !’ he cried. ‘ You —— chicken-livered hound !’

‘ Billy, Billy !’ cried Leroy, while Somerset sprang up with clenched fists.

‘ That’s right,’ returned Bufton, ‘ strike me if you like. You’re young and strong, and I’m an old un, but by —— I’d like to horsewhip you. Do you know what you’ve done ? You’ve wrecked the happiness of one woman, and now you’ve broken the heart of another. Are you blind as well as an idiot ? Couldn’t you see in that girl’s face as she left you that you’ve simply murdered her living soul, and killed the last hope she had ?’

‘ What do you mean ?’ gasped Somerset.

‘ I mean this : either you’d no right to win her love at all, or you should have been prepared to face the consequences. I warned you. I told you what would come of it. She’s no ordinary

woman—she's a mad thing when her blood's up. God knows what she'll do now!

'Do you mean to tell me,' cried Somerset, 'that you think I should have met her half-way and gone away with her?'

'I do, by ——!' returned Bufton. 'There was only that way out of it. I don't say it would have been right, I don't say it would have been wise; but anyone but a cad would have done it. Look here, youngster. I've only seen that look on a woman's face once before, and that was in the face of a girl whom I saw sitting on the kerbstone, and looking at the sky, ten minutes before she threw herself over Waterloo Bridge!'

Before he could say another word Somerset had seized his hat and rushed from the studio. With a savage shrug of the shoulders Bufton took up his painting materials and began to work.

'Do you think he'll overtake her?' murmured Leroy sadly.

'I don't think it. She's got ten minutes' start to the devil, and London's a big place.'

'Surely, Billy, you don't fancy she'll destroy herself?'

'I don't think anything about it,' was the reply. 'I'm sick of the whole business. I saw all this coming, while you, with your sentimental slush about young love, were blind as a bat.'

‘But how could the poor fellow suppose that the girl’s husband would return?’

‘He ought to have been prepared for it. It’s the sort of thing that happens. At any rate, he’s a heartless cub, and I’ve done with him.’

Buften continued to paint frowningly. Presently Leroy put on his coat and took up his hat, and prepared to leave the studio.

‘I think I’ll go and see if I can find him,’ he said.

Buften grinned savagely, and nodded.

Late in the afternoon Leroy returned with the report that his search for Somerset had been in vain. Buften made no comment, but painted on.

Evening came, and the young man did not return. The wind had risen during the afternoon with squalls of sleet and rain. The two men sat opposite to each other by the fire, both looking very dejected. Neither had dined, but Leroy had prepared some coffee and brought in some boiled ham and rolls, of which they had partaken.

Ten o’clock was striking when there was a timid knock at the studio door. Leroy sprang up, opened the door, and admitted Bess Lawrence. The little dressmaker’s face was ghastly pale, and her eyes were streaming with tears.

‘Where is Mr. Somerset?’ she cried. ‘I must see him at once.’

They told her that he had gone out early in

the day and had not returned. She uttered a cry and burst into a flood of tears. Then, still sobbing, she showed them a scrap of paper which she had received that evening. It was brought by a ragged lad and left at Tenterden's. Written on it in pencil were these words:

‘Good-bye, Bess. Take care of yourself, dear, and try to forgive me. I’m never coming back. —ANNIE.’

‘I waited for her all day,’ cried Bess, wringing her hands pitifully, ‘and then when she didn’t come back, I grew frightened, and as I was coming here I got the letter. Oh, Annie, Annie! She has gone away with your friend—with Mr. Somerset!’

As she spoke the door was flung open, and Somerset himself, dripping wet and ghastly pale, staggered into the studio.

‘I’ve searched everywhere,’ he cried, ‘but I can’t find her. I called twice at the house, but the servant told me she hadn’t returned.’ Then, as he recognised Bess, he added: ‘Where is she? For God’s sake tell me!’

They placed the letter in his hand.

Somerset glanced at the paper and went pale as death; then he turned wildly to Bess, who was weeping silently.

‘She says she will never come back,’ he cried.

‘What do you think she has done? Has she gone back to that man?’

‘I think so, sir,’ answered Bess, ‘unless—unless——’ She paused, sobbing, and then added: ‘You don’t know Annie, sir, as I know her. She’s like a mad girl sometimes, when the fit is on her; and I thought last night that her heart was broken. She may not have gone to her husband after all. She may have done worse than that, sir.’

‘Killed herself, do you mean?’ asked Somerset.

‘I don’t know—I don’t know!’ sobbed Bess. ‘She was so miserable!’

Somerset sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. His body shook convulsively, and presently they saw tears stealing through his tremulous fingers. Touched to the quick by the exhibition of sorrow, Leroy stepped forward and placed his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

‘Don’t give way, old chap,’ he said gently. ‘Perhaps things are not so bad as you fancy. We shall have news about her soon—perhaps it will be good news.’

Somerset sprang up, and dashing the tears from his eyes, cried in a broken voice, looking wildly at Bufton: ‘You were right, Billy; I acted like a cad! I ought to have faced the music. If you knew how I hate myself for it all! I’ve killed her! I’ve broken her heart! Oh, what a fool I was to let her go!’

CHAPTER XX.

SEAWARD ONCE MORE.

ON parting with Somerset at the studio, Annie walked out into the streets with the look of a woman who has received her death-sentence. Her eyes were blank and despairing, her cheeks ashen gray, her bloodless lips pressed tight together, as she walked rapidly on, glancing neither to the right nor the left, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, not knowing whither she was going, but instinctively moving onward and avoiding the few pedestrians she met on the way. In a little while she found herself in the Euston Road, moving mechanically westward, as on the previous day, close to the southern gates of Regent's Park. Then, for the first time, she realized that she had been drawn involuntarily towards the place where Matt Watson would be waiting for her, and turning suddenly, as if she

had received a blow, she fled back along the track of her own footsteps, eastward, never resting or pausing until she was close to St. Pancras railway-station.

By this time her resolve was taken, never to meet her husband again or to return to the place where Bess was waiting for her. She had no home now, she said to herself; and without thinking or caring what was to become of her, she decided to escape from London. Had she been able to reason more calmly, she would have realized that the great city was the very place in which she ought to have remained, if she wished to efface herself from both friends and enemies and altogether avoid pursuit; but she did not reason, any more than a panic-stricken creature reasons when flying from some deadly peril.

She was sufficient mistress of herself, however, to feel that it would be both wise and kind to send some sort of message to poor Bess, who would be looking for her so anxiously in Bloomsbury. So she entered a small stationer's shop, and procuring a sheet of paper, she wrote down in pencil the message with which the reader is already familiar, and, placing it in an envelope, addressed it to Bess, at Tenterden's Hotel. Then, sallying forth again into the street, she found a ragged newsboy, who leaped at the chance of

earning a shilling by running with the letter to the hotel, which was little more than half a mile away. Then, having despatched her message, she hastened onward up the City Road.

Fortunately she was not in debt at Tenterden's, her weekly account having been settled on the previous day, and she knew, moreover, that Bess had a little money of her own. She had about a guinea in her pocket—half a sovereign in gold and the rest in silver. Even this, she reflected with a shudder, was his money, for in all the world she had not a farthing of her own. Well, she would keep this, since it was impossible to return it; some day, perhaps, she might be able to repay it. She must keep, also, the clothes she wore, which also, indeed, belonged to him, but that was all. All the rest of the money in the bank, the clothes and trinkets which she had bought with her supposed inheritance, she had left behind her, utterly indifferent as to what became of them, all her thought being how to escape from the life of shameful luxury which she had lately led.

Had the actual and visible form of Death been before her, beckoning to her from the distance, she would have only flown along more rapidly; indeed, she felt within her a dim and confused instinct that it was to her grave she was going,

since there was no longer any peace or happiness for her under the sun. Her yearning now was for silence, for solitude, for the open country far beyond the city; the crowded thoroughfares seemed hateful, and the roar of the traffic stunned and stupefied her, and she had within her a vague terror that she might be arrested and seized, and dragged back by force to Matt Watson, who was legally her master. This terror made her shrink away nervously whenever she came face to face with the police.

Despite her despairing agitation, however, she was outwardly calm, and seemed to a careless eye only a pretty girl hurrying to some appointment. A closer and shrewder inspection would, of course, have told a different tale.

Hours had passed away, and she was still upon her feet, rambling up and down the crowded thoroughfares. Late in the afternoon rain began to fall, but she did not even put up the umbrella which she carried. Sometimes she halted at a shop, looking quietly in at the windows, but in reality she saw nothing real—only Matt Watson's wild and angry face, glaring at her with hungry eyes.

Night had quite fallen when she found herself on the platform at Liverpool Street Station. Someone, a porter or a guard, asked her where she

was going. She glanced at a train which was about to depart, and inquired its destination. Enfield, the man told her, and she gave him the money to run and get her a third-class ticket. He did so, and when he brought it she gave him a few pence for himself. He hurried her into a crowded compartment, just as the train was beginning to move away.

As the train sped onward through the darkness she sat in silence among her fellow-passengers—artisans returning from work, clerks from the City, women and girls and children. They glanced at her curiously and not unsuspiciously; for her dress was above the common, and she looked like a fashionably-attired lady; but she was far too full of her own thoughts to heed or care.

After stopping again and again at small stations on the way, the train arrived at Enfield. Leaving the platform and delivering up her ticket, she found herself in the dark street of a small suburban village. The rain was now falling heavily. Such few shops as the place possessed were closed, and the street was almost deserted.

How dark and quiet it seemed after the roar and turmoil of the great city! Everything was quite still, save for the patter of the rain and the moaning of the wind which drove the cold drops against her face. The silence and the darkness

were grateful to her, and for the first time that day she felt as if she were safe.

Wandering on, she found herself on a small bridge spanning the waters of a dark canal. Beyond were the lights of a few scattered houses, and still further beyond the signal lights of some railway. She halted on the bridge, and, bending over its arch, looked down on the black, sluggish water, glistening dimly in the darkness.

Had she come there to die? Had God drawn her there in her desolation to find rest? She had not hitherto thought of suicide, but her impulse now was to leap over and let the water swallow her up. She looked round furtively; no one seemed near. It would be easy, she thought, to die that way.

But in spite of her utter misery, the blood of her young life ran strong within her, and she shrank from the thought of dying. No, she would live on, at least, for a little; perhaps she would be able to find some quiet country place, where she could abide till she had thought out her future destiny and decided whether to die or live. She was standing in silence looking down at the canal, when she felt a strong hand gripping her arm, and involuntarily she uttered a cry of terror.

‘Hullo, my girl!’ said a gruff voice. ‘What are you doing here?’

She turned and found herself face to face with a rough-bearded man, who looked like an artisan. He had gripped her firmly, and was leaning forward to look at her. Without answering, she tried to free herself, but she was held as in a vice.

‘Who are you?’ demanded the man. ‘You don’t belong hereabouts, I think.’

‘No,’ replied Annie ; ‘I come from London.’

‘Ye come from London?’ repeated the man. ‘You’re not the first neither as I’ve found here looking at the canal, or fished out o’ that there water. But you don’t look like most on ’em. They don’t wear sealskin jackets, like yours.’

‘Please let me go,’ said Annie quietly. ‘You’re hurting my arm. Did you think I was going to drown myself?’ she added, with a forced laugh, as he released her.

‘I doubt you were thinking about it, my girl. What’s the matter? Are ye in trouble?’

‘No particular trouble,’ answered Annie. ‘I came from London this evening by the train, and walked along without thinking, till I found myself here.’

‘Nice night for a walk, ain’t it? Why, you’re soaking wet!’

‘Oh, I’m not sugar, and shan’t melt,’ Annie cried. ‘Good-night.’

‘Here, stop a bit,’ cried the man, following her

as she was walking on. 'Where might ye be bound for?'

'I want to find an inn, or a coffee-house of some kind, where I can shelter till the morning.'

'There ain't no respectable inn hereabouts, and no coffee-house,' answered the man.

'Is there no place where I can find a lodging?' inquired Annie; for the man's manner, though bluff, was honest and kindly, and she felt that he was to be trusted.

'Come along with me and speak to my missis,' he said. 'P'r'aps she can put you up.'

So saying, he led the way across the bridge in the direction of a group of cottages adjoining the canal. Annie followed him listlessly. As they walked on, the man said :

'When I first saw you, missie, I thought you was going to jump down into the water. P'r'aps ye were, and p'r'aps ye wasn't ; that's your business. But any ways, it was lucky I came by.'

'Do people often come to that place to—to put an end to their trouble?' asked Annie, glancing back at the gloomy canal.

'No mistake ; and what's more singular, they comes from all parts. Somethink in the water seems to draw them like. Sometimes it's a mill girl who's got into trouble ; sometimes it's a work-man's wife gone mad with drink ; sometimes it's a

flash girl from London. Since I come here a year ago I've fished out three, and two on 'em was stone-dead.'

Annie shuddered and looked back again. She had had no serious thought of suicide, and yet perhaps, if the man had not appeared so opportunely, she, too, might have been drawn by the black water to her death. Better, perhaps, she thought, if she had been, for by that time her troubles would have been all over.

They reached a row of whitewashed cottages, and the man, approaching one of them, and opening the door, led the way into a small sitting-room in which a cosy fire was burning. The room was very plainly and poorly furnished, but looked quite cheerful and clean. By the fire sat a woman, whose hair was almost white, although her face showed no sign of age. It was a very sad face, lit with very wistful and gentle eyes.

'Here, mother,' said the man, 'I've brought ye a young miss who wants a night's lodging.'

The woman rose, looking wonderingly at Annie. She was evidently astonished, as well she might be; for, seen in the bright light of the room, Annie looked a lady to the finger-tips.

'It's only a poor place, ma'am,' said the woman doubtfully, 'and I'm afraid——'

She hesitated, looking nervously at the man.

‘If you’ll let me rest by the fire a bit,’ Annie said. ‘I’m a little tired ;’ and she walked over to the fireplace and crouched down, holding her hands over the glow. Her dress was dripping with the rain, and her hair had fallen loose over her shoulders.

The man and woman whispered together, glancing from time to time curiously at their visitor, whose appearance seemed to impress them not unfavourably. Then the man left the room, and the woman, quietly approaching Annie, and looking down at her, said gently :

‘My husband tells me you’re a stranger, and that he thinks you’re in some sort of trouble. I don’t want ye to tell me nothing about it unless ye want to, but I’d like to be of service to you if I can. We live all alone now, my husband and me, but there’s a little bedroom upstairs you can have and welcome, if you’d like to stay.’

The tone was so sweet and kindly, the expression of the woman’s sad face so sympathetic, that Annie was deeply touched and in danger for a moment of losing her self-control.

She turned her eyes away and murmured her thanks.

‘You see, miss,’ said the woman, ‘we’d a dear daughter of our own, and if she was with us now, she’d be about your age. It’s her room upstairs

as I can give you. No one has slept in it since she went away.'

'Is she dead?' asked Annie.

The woman's voice broke as she replied :

'No, miss ; she's living. Perhaps it would be better if she was dead, though I can never bring myself to think that. She's living somewhere in London, and sometimes we gets a line from her, but not often. She was prenticed to the dress-making, and had a good place, but afterward—ah, well, miss, I'd rather not speak about it, but I'm in hopes she'll come back to us some day. There's always a home for her here, miss, for she was the only child we ever had.'

In spite of herself, Annie was deeply moved by the woman's patient sorrow. For the first time since she had fled from the studio, her own tears began to fall, and when the woman sat down beside her, and placed a gentle, motherly hand upon her head, the kind touch seemed to dissolve the last icy band around her heart, and she began to sob hysterically.

Presently she grew calmer, and told the woman something of her story, just enough to suggest that she had a potent reason for escaping from London.

They were soon talking together freely, and exchanging womanly confidences, and when the man

returned, he found them sitting side by side by the fire, holding each other's hands.

Fortunately for Annie, in her deep despair and isolation, she had fallen among sympathetic surroundings. The man and woman were worthy folk, of a type not too common among the English lower classes. The man worked at the canal-lock hard by, while the woman kept the house, and both waited anxiously for the day when they would again clasp the errant daughter to their hearts.

Annie slept there that night, a heavy, dreamless sleep, for, despite her youth and strength, she was worn out. When she woke, long after daylight, she found her clothes carefully dried and placed beside her bed, and the woman brought her up a cup of tea.

'My man's gone off to work,' said the woman. 'But he bade me say that you can bide here with us a bit longer, my dear, if you've a mind to stay. We're only poor folk, but you're welcome for the sake of our poor girl.'

But Annie, grown calmer and clearer, had had time to think over her plans, and had at last determined what to do. As soon as she had dressed herself, therefore, she told the good woman that she was compelled to go away.

'I've friends down yonder in Essex,' she said,

‘and I shall go to them and ask their advice. They’ll help me if they can, I know.’

The woman looked at her sadly.

‘But you’ll promise me, won’t you, my dear, never to think of doing what maybe you were thinking of last night, no matter how great your trouble?’

‘You needn’t be afraid,’ answered Annie. ‘I am too fond of my life, though God knows what will become of me.’

The woman kissed her on the forehead.

Before she went away she tried to force her kind hostess to take payment for the night’s lodging, but the woman would not take a farthing. Annie was only too welcome, she said, for the sake of her own dear daughter. So they parted, and never in this world did Annie see the woman again.

The rain of the previous day had passed, and the wintry sun was shining brightly, as Annie walked rapidly along the highway, and, leaving Enfield behind her, approached the neighbourhood of Epping Forest. She had now determined to make her way to Rayleigh, and to take counsel with her old friends the Vicar’s daughters, who might be able, perhaps, to shelter her, and to put her in the way of some honest work. Rayleigh, she gathered, was at least forty miles away, but she

meant to wander thither on foot instead of again taking the train. She was a good walker, and she loved the freedom of the quiet road. She shrank still from observation, with a nervous dread of being recognised and pursued.

Early in the afternoon, after a long walk through the forest, she reached the little village of Chigwell, on the highroad to Chelmsford. Here she rested for a short time outside a small wayside inn, and ate a little bread-and-cheese ; for, thanks to the fresh air and exercise, Nature was rapidly asserting its needs, and she was quite hungry. When she fared forward again her eyes were brighter, her tread stronger and firmer on the ground. She began for the first time to feel like herself, with the pulse of her young life beating powerfully within her. She felt herself a girl again, careless, strong, and free. There was a faint flush on her cheek, a flash of pride and determination in her eye.

The highway was very quiet, and she encountered very few people. Now and then a waggon passed, or the cart of some farmer driving to the neighbouring market town ; and from time to time she met a tramp on his way to the great city, or a gipsy loafing by the wayside. No one, however, molested her, though more than one passer-by looked at her in surprise, and gave her a greeting

to which she carelessly responded. Out there in the open country, to which she had been accustomed all her life, she was no timid maiden, afraid of being rudely dealt with. The roughest man she met inspired her with no fear. It was the great world behind her, and the one solitary figure, that she dreaded ; and from these she was escaping, as she thought, for ever.

CHAPTER XXI.

BY THE GREAT RIVER.

LATE that evening she found herself in the town of Chelmsford. It had been market-day, and the streets were still crowded with country folk of all descriptions, who were mainly celebrating the occasion by keeping the public-houses busy. But she found a quiet coffee-house in a by-street, and slept there for the night. At daybreak she rose, and, guided by the finger-posts, proceeded along the country road towards Rayleigh. She walked rapidly, with an ever-growing sense of strength and freedom, and early in the day she reached her destination.

Here, however, she was doomed to disappointment. Both the Vicar and his two daughters were away in London, and were not expected back for at least a week. To her annoyance and embarrassment, moreover, two or three people seemed to

recognise her, as wearily and dejectedly she made her way out of the village.

She walked quickly on till she passed the last straggling cottages, and then, climbing a small hill, saw, far away in the distance, dark clouds hanging over the shimmering estuary of the Thames. The wind was blowing freshly from the Channel, and the air she breathed was salt with the foam of the sea.

She paused, gazing seaward, and the spirit of her old life descended upon her. She was again Annie of Canvey Island, free to come and go as she listed. It seemed as if all that had passed was a dream, as if she had never been away at all.

What was she to do? Where was she to find a hiding-place? It was clear to her that if she returned to her old home on Canvey Island, she would be virtually delivering herself up to her pursuer; for doubtless Matt Watson was in communication with the Endells, who would not fail to side with her husband against her. Mrs. Endell she might have trusted, but she knew well that the old man would do anything for money. Yes, if she reappeared at the Lobster Smack, Matt Watson would be certain to seek her and find her, and then——

Her cheek flushed and her eyes flashed, while the old passionate line grew above her eyes. If

he did find her, what then? She would resist him and defy him with a strength that had seemed denied to her when she was a fine lady, and if he persisted, there would be always one final refuge—the Great River, for ever flowing past the door. Her dread of the man had already grown less; it was growing still less with every breath of the free air she drew. In London, surrounded by strangers, conscious of an alien and stifling atmosphere, spellbound also by her love for Somerset, she had felt paralyzed by the mere propinquity of her husband. At Canvey Island Nature would help her to defy him.

She was yearning, moreover, to look at the old place—to walk among the lonely scenes where she had spent her early girlhood, and where the Spirit of Love had first found her. She was drawn towards it now as those poor girls had been drawn to the black canal pool at Enfield. She felt that she must go there again, even if it were to die.

She walked on, following the lonely road which led towards the woods surrounding Hadleigh and its ruined castle. Scarcely a soul passed her on the way. As the sun was just beginning to set, she stood among the castle ruins, looking down.

Below her, on her right hand, lay the lonely island, with every creek and inlet distinct as on a map; the great marshes a vivid green, the sea-

walls black and gray, the pools and creeks flashing like quicksilver. Beyond lay the river, with its great silent vessels creeping to and fro ; and away eastward to the left of her, the shrimping-fleet of Leigh lay at anchor, rocked on the sparkling waters of the Sea.

It was nearly high-water, and the tide was still creeping upward, so that every creek and inlet was flooded, and it was difficult to tell where land ended and water began. Flocks of white gulls were hovering over the creeks. From time to time out of the silence came the shrill scream of the curlew.

As she gazed down, the spirit of revolt within her grew stronger and stronger. When she had dwelt yonder almost alone, she had always been haunted by the fear that her husband might some day return, and the fear had poisoned her happiness, so that she had yearned to fly away. But now for the first time a great peace came upon her—out of the solitude, out of the great river, out of the circumjacent Sea. It seemed to her as if she had always loved the place, instead of really hating it, as she had so often done. The tears came into her eyes, and blotted the vision from her sight.

To gain the island at high-water, it was necessary for her to pass along the ascents leading

towards Benfleet, until she could cross by the only available road. She soon found herself, therefore, among the leafless woods, close to the spot where she had first held her lips to those of her young lover. She reached the spot, she paused there, and falling on her knees, covered her face with her hands and wept like a child.

He had deserted her cruelly in her hour of need, but her first feeling of dishallucination and indignation against him had passed away, and she remembered only his charm, his tenderness, his personal beauty and attraction. He was still her Prince Charming, though she had left him for ever. If he had never come into her life, she would scarcely have lived at all. She still felt that she was ready to sacrifice all the world, her very existence, for one kind look from him, one embrace, one kiss; and the more her yearning grew towards him, the stronger grew her resolve never to yield herself to the embrace of any other man.

Down the lonely path she wandered, till she crossed the great creek and stood upon Canvey Island. By this time it was already growing dark, but she knew every footstep of the way. At last she saw the lights of the Lobster Smack gleaming before her. She hastened forward with the light wind blowing keenly in her face, and

approaching the windows, looked in. There was a light in only one of them—that of the little parlour—and there, all alone by the fire, engaged in some coarse needlework, Mrs. Endell was sitting.

The next moment Annie ran in at the open door, threw open the sitting-room door, and stood, panting and smiling strangely, before the old woman, who sprang to her feet with a cry.

‘Who’s that? Sakes alive, Annie! is that you?’

With something of her old air of boldness and abandon, Annie approached the old woman, and throwing her arms around her neck, kissed her on both cheeks.

‘Yes, mother, I’ve come back,’ she cried. ‘I hope you’re glad to see me.’

Her eyes flashed, and her cheek flushed. For the moment she was again the Annie of Canvey Island.

But the old woman’s face was clouded, her expression sadly troubled. She looked keenly at Annie and shook her head.

‘What brings ’e here, lass?’ she questioned. ‘I thought ye was up in London. How did ’e come?’

‘I walked, mother,’ Annie cried.

‘Walked? Sakes alive! All the way from London, d’ye mean?’

'All the way from London,' was the reply ;
'but I slept two nights upon the way. Where's Job?'

'He were sent for yesterday,' said Mrs. Endell.
'I guess you know who sent for him?'

'Matt Watson?'

'Ay, Matt Watson,' answered the old woman.
'What's come over between ye, Annie? I've a notion that there's trouble, and that's why you've come down here.'

Annie threw herself into a chair. A wild spirit of hysterical gaiety seemed to possess her, she knew not why. She took off her hat and placed it on the table.

'I'm glad I came, mother,' she cried, with a low, nervous laugh. 'It feels like home.'

'But Matt, my lass. What about Matt?' said Mrs. Endell. 'Where is he? Is he a-coming down home, too?'

Annie shook her head.

'No, mother.'

'Then what do it mean, Annie? He's your husband, ain't he? And as good a man as ever drew breath. He saved 'e from the sea, and he made 'e a lady. It's my belief he'd cut off his right hand to please 'e.'

'Listen to me, mother,' said Annie quietly,
'and when I've told you everything, perhaps

you'll understand. I know I'm wicked and ungrateful, and that I ought to care for Matt, seeing all that he's done for me, but I can't—I can't. I've run away from him for ever ; and at first I think I meant to kill myself, but I didn't, and you see I'm still alive. And I didn't mean to come here, but I think the sea drew me, and I couldn't keep away.'

'Just the same mad thing as you used to be !' cried Mrs. Endell. 'But you're Matt's wedded wife, my lass, and he's a right to claim ye. Don't 'e know he's a rich man now—a heap richer than we thought? And it's all yours, Annie ; and he loves 'e dearly, and—and——'

'I can never live with Matt Watson, mother,' Annie answered, while the flush faded from her cheeks, and the dark line gathered over her eyes.

'Never live with him? Why not?'

'Because I hate him ! Because I've always hated and been afraid of him. His very touch makes me sick. I know he's been good to me, but I can't help that. All I want is never to see his face again.'

'But you don't know what you're saying!' cried Mrs. Endell. 'He's your husband, ain't he?'

'No !' answered Annie. 'He is not my husband—and whether he is or not, it doesn't matter. Our marriage doesn't count—if it was a marriage at all.'

The old woman looked at her keenly, and then said angrily between her set lips :

‘I know what this means, you mad fool! You’ve been carrying on again with that young painter chap who was down here. I wish we’d never seen his face. But mind ‘e, there’s right and wrong in everything, and it’s a bad job for him if he’s come between man and wife.’

With a shrug of her shoulders, Annie rose.

‘You needn’t be afraid, mother. There’s nothing whatever between Mr. Somerset and me. If there ever was anything, it’s all over long ago.’

‘The better for him. If Matt thought he’d been making up to ‘e, he’d have his life.’

‘I dare say,’ returned Annie carelessly, and crossing to the window, she gazed out into the darkness, while the old woman watched her anxiously. Presently she turned and said :

‘I suppose, mother, you won’t drive me away? You’ll give me the run of the house at least to-night?’

‘You can stay and welcome, Annie,’ replied Mrs. Endell. ‘You know that well enough.’

‘And Job’s in London? Well, I’m rather glad. It’s better to have you all to myself. It seems like old times, doesn’t it?’

The next minute she ran from the room into the

kitchen, and returned with a glass of milk in one hand, and a slice of bread in the other.

‘This is my supper,’ she said, nodding gaily to Mrs. Endell. ‘You see, I’m making myself at home.’

She ate the bread and drank the milk as if she had not a care in the world. She herself scarcely knew what possessed her, she felt so wild and light-headed.

The old woman continued to watch her in undisguised suspicion and alarm, for she saw clearly that the girl’s wild mood was merely hysterical, and guessed that it would soon be succeeded by something very different. Moving restlessly to and fro, with the quick eager motion of an animal just escaped from captivity, Annie looked strangely beautiful even in the weary sight of Mrs. Endell. Her face was marble, but her eyes burnt brightly, even dangerously; her hair, which she had unloosened, fell upon her shoulder; her lips were parted, and her white teeth gleamed as if she were smiling. But in spite of all this, there was something in her manner which was less sane than despairing, more reckless than really self-possessed.

‘Annie, my lass,’ the old woman cried at last, ‘don’t go on like that! Sit down and talk to me serious, if ye can. You can’t deceive me, my lass—I know ’e too well. Your heart’s full o’ trouble!’

Annie stood still and looked her in the face.

‘You’re right, mother,’ she replied; ‘it’s broken!’ And throwing herself on her knees, she buried her face in her hands, moaning and sobbing and laughing hysterically, all as it were in one breath.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HUE AND CRY.

IN the studio there was silence for a space after Somerset's wild outcry of grief and self-reproach. Bess checked her tears, and by a strong effort subdued the sobs which shook her, half frightened by the breakdown of a man whom she had hitherto known to be so strong and self-restrained. Leroy, his tender heart wrung by his friend's grief and his own utter inability to help or relieve it, pottered about the room with a shuffling tread, dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief, without in the least trying to hide his emotion, the long tails of his torn and patched old dressing-gown flapping about his heels. Bufton, sitting apart in a gloomy corner of the studio, beside a table supporting a shaded lamp, which threw a restricted circle of vivid light on the etching on which he had been at work when Bess entered, cleared his throat noisily, but made no other sign.

‘Cheer up, old chap, cheer up!’ said Leroy at last, ambling up to Somerset’s chair and patting the young man on the shoulder, as he sat with his head bent forward and his face hidden in his hands. ‘We shall find her—we’re bound to find her. Miss Lawrence’ (here he bowed politely to Bess) ‘will help to look for her. So will I. So will Billy; won’t you, Billy? Why,’ he exclaimed in a sudden tone of triumph, which made even Somerset turn round and look at him, ‘in my opinion, she’s as good as found already!’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Somerset, with a gasp of hopefulness in his voice.

‘I’ll tell you where she is,’ continued Leroy. ‘What a pack of dunderheads we all must be not to have thought of it before! She’s gone back to the place where you first met her; that old inn on Canvey Island—the Lobster Smack, or whatever it is. Why, where else should she go? Naturally, in a trouble like this, she’d run back to them. Eh, miss? What do you think, my dear?’

Bess shook her head, with the tears running silently down her cheeks.

‘No, sir, she isn’t there—that’s the very last place she’d go to.’

‘But why not?’

‘Because it’s the first place he would go to look for her.’

The hope and triumph went out of the affectionate old fellow's face, leaving it as blank as a transparency from which the light has been withdrawn.

'I'm afraid that's true,' he said dolefully, and resumed his agitated trot about the room. When next he spoke it was with a sudden, sharp, angry querulousness, which no one there had ever heard in his gentle voice before.

'Hang it, Billy! don't sit there like an old Japanese idol, while we're all in such trouble. You're the cleverest of the whole gang of us. Speak out and tell us what we should do. Make some sort of suggestion, I implore you!'

At this appeal Bufton laid down his needle, and after a minute's thoughtful puffing at his pipe, rose from his chair.

'There's only one thing to be done that I can see, and that is to put the matter into the hands of the police.'

'The police!' repeated Bess, in a tone of horror. Like most women of her class, she had only the vaguest ideas on the subject of the civil force, and the name in connection with her beloved Annie sounded terrible to her.

'The police,' repeated Bufton; 'they'll find her if she's—if she's findable.' He had had the words 'above ground' on his lips, but checked them and

substituted the softer phrase. 'The first thing to do is to draw up a full description of her. If we let the police have that to-night, it will be in the hands of every policeman for a hundred miles round by this time to-morrow night. You do that, Leroy; you're the literary member of the trio, and you'll do it best. You've got a photograph of her, haven't you, young un?'

Somerset sprang to his feet, ran to a desk, and after a brief search produced a *carte-de-visite* of the type fashionable in those days. It would be thought but poorly of in these latter days of artistic photography, but it had the best of all recommendations for the purpose for which it was needed; it was a speaking likeness.

'Good!' said Bufton, after a glance at it. 'Cut round to Dickens and Bilton in Tottenham Court Road, and tell 'em you want a hundred copies of that as soon as they can manage 'em. If they're shut up, knock 'em up and say it's an affair of life and death. Then come on to the police-station, and you'll find us there.'

Somerset snatched up his hat and stick, and rushed out of the studio to perform his errand. Leroy had already seated himself at his writing-desk, and was engaged in minutely describing the appearance of the missing girl. Prompted by Bess, he remembered with perfect accuracy every detail

of the costume worn by Annie at the moment of her departure ; he produced a verbal portrait of her almost as life-like and telling in its way as the photograph itself.

‘ Good ! ’ said Bufton again, after reading it with the most searching attention. ‘ And now we’ll take it to the station. You needn’t come, my dear,’ he continued to Bess. ‘ You look worn and worried out of your life. You’d better go home and try to get a little sleep.’

‘ Oh no,’ said Bess ; ‘ please let me go with you. I feel nearer to Annie, and more as if she’d come back to me, when I’m with you.’

‘ You’re a good little girl,’ said Bufton. He struggled into his overcoat, and as he did so Leroy returned from his bedroom equipped for the street, and the two friends and the girl set out together to the police-office in Tottenham Court Road.

It was a chill, raw night, with a searching wind and frequent passing showers of rain. The streets were thick with mire, and overhead the sky was clouded with a sullen, slow, travelling wrack which promised a heavy downfall before the dawn. Neither of the trio spoke a word as they trudged together through the mire, but the thoughts of all three were busy with fancies dreadfully in keeping with the wild, black night about them and the sad errand on which they were bound. Here and

there they passed a shrinking figure, lurking in the deeper shadows or at the corner of the by-streets, and when the figure thus dimly seen was that of a woman, each knew, however deep might be the gloom around them, that the eyes of the other two were, like his own, turned on it with a dreadful, eager, shrinking scrutiny. The thought that Annie might be abroad, homeless, unfriended, on such a night, was so horrible to Bess that for a moment she almost fainted under the stress of horror caused by the idea. But she conquered her weakness resolutely, and fought the hysteric spasm down. If she could only do so little to aid the two strong men beside her, at least she could refrain from troubling their thoughts and embarrassing their motions.

They reached the station. It was the first time Bess had ever entered such a place, and, though she had no definite idea at all of what it might be like, she was vaguely disappointed by its aspect of quiet cleanliness and business regularity. In the trim, rectangular room, lit by a pair of gas-jets, a clear fire was burning in a brightly-polished grate. At the further end was a railed space, of whose use Annie could form no idea, and which was in fact the dock. At the opposite end two officers were methodically filling in and ticking off piles of printed forms, and apparently getting through a

good deal of work in a quiet, methodic fashion. They looked up as the visitors entered, and one of them, advancing, set a chair for Bess, and looked at Bufton with an expression of alert and business-like inquiry, perfectly prepared for any sort of communication relating to anything between larceny and murder.

‘We have come,’ said Bufton, ‘to give information regarding the loss of a young lady who has been missing since yesterday, and to ask your assistance in tracing her. Here,’ he continued, handing the paper which Leroy had drawn up to the officer, ‘is a detailed description of her dress and appearance.’

• The officer took the paper, and read it in a low murmur to himself, marking his approval of its clearness and conciseness with an occasional nod. Having finished it, he stood scratching his cheek in a thoughtful manner for a moment, and then struck a bell upon the desk. The summons was answered by a third officer.

‘Send Barney here,’ said the sergeant.

The man withdrew, and immediately after a fourth officer made his appearance, a man with a face so comically and indubitably Irish that, even in his distressed anxiety of mind, Bufton marked him as a model for some future picture. The sergeant drew him apart, and, giving him the

description, talked with him in a low tone, pointing out certain phrases in the paper to his attention.

‘Not a bit loike it,’ said the new-comer, in an accent which was the veritable vocal counterpart of his face. ‘Not the laste taste loike it, sor.’

‘You’re quite sure?’ said the sergeant.

‘Wasn’t it me that found her?’ asked the other. ‘This is a gurl of twinty, her that I found was five-and-thirty, if she was a day. The description says a “sealskin jacket”; t’other one had no jacket.’

‘I suppose you’re right then,’ said the sergeant. ‘Get your helmet on, and take this to the printers’. Say we must have five hundred copies by three o’clock.’

He came back to the three friends, who had listened to such scraps of the dialogue as had reached their ears with a strained attention.

‘I thought perhaps I might have had information for you, but it turns out to be another case. The matter will be put in hand at once, and you shall have the earliest news we get.’

A little, a very little, comforted by having at least taken a step towards solving the dreadful mystery of Annie’s disappearance, they left the office, meeting Somerset coming from the photographers’. He turned homeward with them, and

they related the gist of their interview with the sergeant. He heard it silently, and silently still they walked back to the door of the studio.

‘I’ll see you home,’ said Somerset to Bess. She shook hands with Bufton and Leroy, thanking them for their help and sympathy, though she was almost afraid to trust her voice, and she and Somerset went on to Tenterden’s.

‘Do they know here what has happened?’ asked Somerset, as they paused before the door. It was the first time he had spoken since they had left the studio.

‘No,’ said Bess. ‘They know she’s away, but not why or how. I don’t want Annie to be talked over by them.’

‘Thank you,’ he said simply; and the door being opened in answer to his ring, they said ‘Good-night,’ and parted for the time.

Somerset turned his face towards home, but, arrived almost at his own door, turned on his heel, and walked in another direction. His whirling brain and twitching nerves made sleep the most hopeless of impossibilities, and called aloud for physical action. He seemed incapable of anything like definite thought, but his mind was full of short-lived pictures and broken phrases. He saw Annie’s face as he had last beheld it, and as he had seen it on many former occasions, full of

the joy of life and love, and groaned bitterly at the contrast. He remembered Bufton's words about the face of the woman he had seen a few hours before she had ended her miseries. He heard his voice scathingly denouncing him as a cad and a coward, and sickened with alternate rage and self-accusation as he recalled the words. It was not true, it was not just, and yet, oh, if the good God would only restore him to Annie—Annie as he had known her, brave and frank, honest and beautiful, tender and true—he would show her and Bufton and the world that he was no such poor creature as they took him for; he would hold her, guard her, against the world. What was there that the world could yield worthy to be set against the love of such a woman?

He had walked fast and far before he became aware that the threatened storm had burst, and that it was raining heavily. He had turned to walk again towards his home, when a curious sensation of being watched and followed took possession of him. He listened as he strode on along the shining pavement, and was certain that he could hear, through the sighing of the wind and the splashing of the rain, a footstep pursuing him. He slackened his pace, but the step came no nearer, though it still lingered in his rear, persistent, not to be shaken off. He turned off into

a street at right angles, and drew himself into the shadow under the wall of a house. A figure turned the corner, and Somerset, stepping out with the intention of challenging it, and asking why he was thus dogged and spied upon, found himself face to face with Leroy.

‘You, old chap! Why, what are you wandering about in this wild way for?’

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ answered Leroy. ‘I saw you take Miss Lawrence home, and then when you started to walk I followed you.’

‘What a good fellow you are!’ said Somerset, taking his arm. ‘I wish, Leroy, I was more like you!’

‘Like me!’ said the old artist. ‘That’s a queer wish, dear boy!’

‘It’s a true one,’ said Somerset. ‘Billy spoke the truth about me. I—I’m a cad. I’m a selfish, cold-hearted, cowardly trifier. I’ve neither heart, nor brains, nor courage. The best and most beautiful girl I ever met, the best that ever lived, I think, loves me—God knows why!—and I fling her love away and break her heart.’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Leroy gently, ‘don’t be too hard on yourself. Billy spoke harshly, as he often does. You’re neither a cad nor a coward, and you prove you’re not by accusing yourself. You’re young, Charlie, and that’s all that’s the

matter with you. Being young, you're a bit selfish, a bit egotistical, a bit thankless, perhaps, for the good the gods have given you. You wanted to learn what trouble was; you wanted to learn what poor creatures we all are till we have learned to face the tragedies and disappointments of life. Perhaps if we knew all, this trouble has come on you to teach you that lesson, and I know, Charlie, that you're the man to learn it, and profit by it. There's good stuff in you, my lad. I've watched you this many a day, and I know it. You'll make a strong man yet.'

Humbled and chastened even by the comfort Leroy's words brought to his sore heart, Somerset walked on by the side of his gentle old friend in silence for a time. He paused for a moment at the corner of the street in which he lived.

'Tell me, Leroy,' he said, 'tell me what you really think. Tell me your true thought whatever it may be. Do you think that Annie——'

He could not speak the question, but stood staring at his old friend with haggard eyes.

'No,' said Leroy, who understood the awful fear which haunted him. 'I'm sure she would not. She's too brave, too good, to take the coward's way out of trouble.'

'Do you think we shall find her?'

'As for that, God knows. We must hope and

do our best. But wherever she is, she is alive, I feel sure of that.'

'God bless you for saying that !' said Somerset, and with a long hand-shake they parted for the night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BLOW IN THE DARK.

SOME days passed, full of miserable perplexity for Bess and for the three friends. They haunted the police-office in Tottenham Court Road by day, and spent hours of every night in wandering about the streets, hoping against hope for some trace of their lost darling. In the depth of her misery an idea suddenly occurred to Bess, which, improbable as it was, brought with it a faint gleam of hope and comfort—the idea that Annie might after all have joined the wild, strange Man of the Sea who claimed her as his wife. She did not dare to hint this hope to Somerset, to whom such a consummation would have been almost as terrible as Annie's death, and though she yearned to speak it to Bufton and Leroy, forbore to do so, fearing that they might repeat it to the young man. As the days went on, and no news of the wanderer arrived, the idea grew and strengthened in Bess's

mind. It was not the lot for Annie that she would have desired, but it was better to think of her alive and well, even as Matt Watson's unwilling bride, than cold and dead beneath the gloomy waters of the Thames.

'She must be with her husband—with that man,' said Bess to herself. 'If she isn't, how is it that he hasn't been here to look for her?'

But even this poor hope was destined to be rudely dispelled. Finding the little stock of money in her possession melting rapidly, Bess had determined to quit Tenterden's Hotel, to find a cheaper lodging, and to support herself again with her needle. She was packing up her simple wardrobe, and looking with affectionate and tearful eyes at the garments and trinkets which had been given to her by her lost friend, when a rap came to her room door. It was one of the maids of the hotel, who announced that she was wanted down below by a stranger.

'A stranger!' repeated Bess. 'Is it Mr. Somerset? Mr. Bufton? Mr. Leroy?'

The maid shook her head at the mention of each name in turn.

'No, miss, it's none of them. It's a strange-looking person—some sort of a foreigner, I should think, with a lot of black hair about his face and rings in his ears.'

‘Matt Watson,’ said Bess to herself, and never before did any name sound so sweet. He had come with news of Annie! She ran past the girl without another word, and tore downstairs to the visitors’ sitting-room. There he was standing, an uncouth figure enough, though he had made considerable improvement in his dress. His back was towards the window, so that Bess did not for the moment distinguish the curious look, half-savage, half-cunning, which he bent upon her as she entered.

‘Mr. Watson?’ she panted, breathing hard with her excitement and her rapid run downstairs.

‘Ay, Watson’s my name,’ he said; ‘Matt Watson! I’m Annie’s oldest and closest friend.’

‘Oh, Mr. Watson, where is she? Tell me she’s alive and well and happy, for pity’s sake!’

He stared at her through his tangled mane of hair, like a half-puzzled, half-angry bull, and was silent for full half a minute, while Bess stood before him with clasped hands, panting with eagerness to hear his news.

‘Stow that!’ he said roughly at last. ‘It’s me that wants to know where my gel is.’

Bess started forward with a frightened, imploring gesture.

‘Oh, sir!’ she cried, ‘don’t you know?’

‘How the thunder should I?’ he asked in return. ‘Look here, my lass, quit your play-actin’ and talk straight. I want my wife, and I’m going to have her. So now out with it. Where is she to be found?’

Between the ruin of her hope that Matt Watson had brought news of her lost friend and her terror at his threatening aspect, Bess was nearly distraught.

‘I don’t know, Mr. Watson. I don’t know where she is. I thought—I hoped that she was with you, and that you had come to give me news of her.’

‘With me?’ he repeated. He fell silent for a moment, still with his burning eyes fixed on Bess’s face. As he looked at her a conviction that she was speaking the truth grew in his mind. He went pale under the deep bronze of his face, and his hands began to tremble. ‘D’ye mean it?’ he asked in an altered voice. ‘Are ye tellin’ the truth, my lass, when you say you don’t know where Annie is?’

‘Nobody knows where she is,’ said Bess. ‘We set the police to search for her five days ago, and they can’t find her. Oh, Annie! Annie! She must be dead!’

It was not in nature to doubt the genuineness of her grief and despair. Watson felt that she was

speaking truly. With a scared face and trembling limbs he dropped into a chair.

‘Annie!’ he groaned. ‘My wife! My little gel!’

The strong, rude man broke down, and Bess, her heart torn with grief for Annie and pity for him, could find no word of comfort. But he was little prone to the melting mood, and soon pulled himself together. He turned to the window for a moment, and when he next fronted Bess his face wore its old familiar expression of obstinate ferocity.

‘She’s gone,’ he said, ‘and you don’t know where she’s gone?’ Bess shook her head. ‘Then it’s my business to find her, and I’ll do it. And when I find her——’ he paused for a moment, and then drove one fist into the palm of the other hand—‘I hope I’ll find her alone. D’ye understand, lass? If she’s with *him*——’

‘With whom?’ asked Annie.

‘That dandified, lily-fingered, sneerin’ swell as I met her with in the street.’

‘Mr. Somerset?’

‘Ay, if that’s his name.’

‘With him?’ cried Bess. ‘Why, he’s helping to try to find her. He’s nearly mad with grief about her loss. I—I—mean——’

Watson cut her short with a horrible laugh.

‘Nearly mad with grief about the loss of my wife, is he? He’ll be madder if I catch him alongside of her!’

‘You have no right,’ cried Bess hotly, ‘to think such things of Annie!’

‘Maybe I haven’t,’ said Watson—‘maybe I have.’

He took up his hat from the table.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Bess.

‘I’m going to look for my gel,’ said Watson. ‘Don’t you be afeared for her, my lass. I wouldn’t hurt a hair of her head for all the gold in Californy. But if it’s him as has led her astray out of my bearings——’

He left the sentence unfinished, but his face was frightful as he spoke.

‘Oh dear! oh dear!’ cried Bess, distracted by grief and terror. ‘Why didn’t you come sooner and take her away with you?’

‘Why?’ repeated Watson. ‘Because I’m a soft-hearted fool. I could see as it was a good deal of a shock to her, seeing me after all those years as she’d thought me dead; so I thinks to myself, “I’ll give her a day or two to get used to the notion.” If I’d ha’ claimed my rights straight off, this would never have happened. But I’ll find her—I’ll find her if she’s livin’, and if it’s him as is hiding her from me, by the living Lord I’ll have his life!’

Without another word he went away. Bess, peeping fearfully after him from behind the curtain, saw with a great sigh of relief that he did not turn towards Somerset's studio, but walked rapidly in the contrary direction. With a sudden thought she ran upstairs, hastily donned her hat and jacket, and walked to the studio as quickly as she could cover the ground.

The trio of friends were all there in the old familiar room. Bufton was at his easel, Leroy was writing at his desk, Somerset opened the door to her, brush in hand. All these looked at her as she entered, and her pale face and labouring breath told them that something had happened.

'For God's sake, my girl,' cried Leroy, 'what is it? Have you any news?'

'Not of her,' replied Bess. 'But I have news that Mr. Somerset must hear at once. Matt Watson called at the hotel this morning.'

'Well?' asked Leroy, the most excitable of the party. 'Has he heard anything of her?'

'No,' said Bess. 'He did not even know that she had left the hotel. When I told him he got into a terrible taking. He thinks that Annie has run away with you, Mr. Somerset; or at least that you know where she is, and are hiding her from him—and he said—he said——'

Bess went so white and trembled so violently

that Bufton, with kindly violence, placed her into a chair.

‘Well?’ repeated Somerset. ‘He said?’

‘He said he’d kill you!’

Somerset gave a mirthless laugh and went back to his easel.

‘Is that all?’ he asked calmly. He seemed the least moved of the party.

‘He’s a dreadful man,’ said Bess. ‘Oh, Mr. Somerset, please be careful!’

‘I’ll be careful, my dear,’ replied Somerset. ‘Thank you very much for the trouble you’ve taken, but please don’t worry about it. Threatened men live long, you know!’

His unspoken thought was that he would as soon meet death at Matt Watson’s hands, or in any other way, as go on living without the woman whose love he had won and lost. Without Annie life looked very bleak and desolate to him, and the uncertainty of her fate was an abiding torture. Between baffled love and terrible uncertainty, and the self-contempt which Bufton’s scornful words had awakened in his heart, he was well-nigh mad at moments. He controlled himself to outward calm by constant effort of will, such as he had never supposed himself to possess—had not, in fact, possessed a month before. He had settled down to work on his picture for the next Spring

exhibition with a dogged constancy which had surprised his two chums, and only the pallor of his cheek and the darkening circles round his eyes betrayed the terrible condition of emotion in which he lived.

‘The cub’s beginning to show a bit of grit,’ muttered Bufton to himself. He had begun to repent of the harshness of his first outbreak against Somerset, and showed as much in his softened manner towards him. It was rarely his fashion to apologize in set phrases.

That night, and several nights afterwards, when Somerset went out for his usual gloomy ramble about the streets, poor Leroy insisted on accompanying him.

‘It really is not safe, dear boy,’ he said, ‘to have you wandering about all kinds of places, alone and unprotected, with that murderous villain hanging about and waiting his opportunity.’

With the strength of a fly, Leroy had the heart of a lion, and fully believed himself an escort capable of discomfiting a whole army of midnight assassins. He used solemnly to arm himself with an enormous blackthorn cudgel, and with this under his arm, ambled at his young friend’s side, ready to do battle for him against any odds. His quaint devotion touched Somerset, and at any other time would have vastly amused him.

One night, however, he managed to give his faithful old friend the slip, and got out into the streets alone. He wandered about till long past midnight, in the aimless, wretched fashion now grown habitual with him, and then, feeling tired enough to hope for sleep, which had of late visited him but rarely, turned his steps towards Bloomsbury. It was a cold, wet night, the sky was thick with cloud, and the streets at that hour were deserted by all but the utterly destitute. As Somerset turned the corner of the street in which the studio was situated, a figure leaped out of the dark shadow of a doorway. There was a gas lamp at a little distance, and Somerset's quick eye caught the gleam of a weapon. He struck out smartly at his assailant, but too late to save himself; he felt a sudden spasm of pain, succeeded by a sensation of deathly sickness, and fell to the earth unconscious.

How long he lay there he never knew, but when he came to himself it was in the familiar lamp-light of the studio. A man, whom he recognised as a surgeon practising in the neighbourhood, was bending over him, and Leroy and Bufton were standing near the couch on which he lay. His head was throbbing violently, and along his left side he felt a sensation of burning pain.

‘He’ll do now,’ said the surgeon. ‘It’s a nasty

cut, and the effusion of blood has been considerable ; but all things considered, it's not so bad as it might have been.'

'You—you don't think,' began Leroy with a tremor in his voice.

'I don't think there's any real danger,' said the surgeon. 'He will probably get feverish in a little while, light-headed, perhaps, but don't let that alarm you. I'll send round a bottle of medicine at once, and look in again in the morning. Shall I communicate with the police, or would you prefer to do so yourselves?'

'We'll attend to that,' said Somerset.


The sound of his voice made them all start.

'Pray, pray be calm, Mr. Somerset!' said the surgeon. 'And—you will excuse me, I am sure—under the circumstances, the less you speak or exert yourself in any fashion the better.'

'Thank you,' said Somerset.

The surgeon went away after giving a few general directions and reiterating his promise to look round again in the morning. When he had gone Somerset called to Bufton and Leroy to come and sit beside him and rehearse to him what had passed during the period of his unconsciousness. He felt as weak as a child, and it was only by a great effort that he could make his voice audible.

'Take it as quietly as you can, young un,' said



Buften, 'and don't speak a word that you can help. I'll tell you all I know. I'd been reading all the night, and an hour ago I went to the end of the mews to get a breath of fresh air. I hadn't been there a minute when you came round the corner of the street, and you were only three doors away when the fellow, who must have kept himself precious close, for I hadn't an idea that there was a living soul in the street, sprang out at you. It was all so rapid that I was fairly paralyzed, till I saw you fall. Then I came out and grabbed at the fellow, but he dodged like a cat and ran like a greyhound. I followed him as far as Great Russell Street, and then saw it was hopeless to pursue him any longer, and besides, I didn't know how you would be getting on. So I doubled back and found you where you had fallen. You were quite unconscious and you were bleeding badly. Leroy helped me to carry you in, and I managed to stop the bleeding, while he ran round to fetch the doctor.'

'Oh, Charles, Charles,' said Leroy, 'why would you go out alone? This would never have happened if I had been with you.'

'Did you see the fellow?' asked Somerset.

'Not distinctly,' answered Buften. 'I saw that he wore a beard and looked like some sort of a foreigner.'

Somerset lay quiet for a moment, then he asked :

‘ You have said nothing to the police yet ?’

‘ No,’ said Bufton, interchanging a look with Leroy.

‘ I am glad of that. Say nothing, even if the doctor tells you that I am in serious danger. And remember this ’—his feeble voice strengthened for a moment — ‘ if suspicion should fall on Matt Watson, the man who threatened me, Annie’s husband, remember that I told you that I saw the man who wounded me quite plainly, and it was *not* Matt Watson. Do you understand ?’

The two men looked at each other again and were silent.

‘ Do you understand ?’ repeated Somerset. ‘ The man who struck me was not Annie’s husband. It was a stranger—a man I never saw before in my life. You will say that on my authority, if it is ever necessary to say anything at all about the matter.’

‘ We’ll remember,’ said Bufton.

Leroy silently pressed Somerset’s hand, and turned away to hide the tears with which his eyes were full. Somerset, weak with loss of blood, and fatigued by the few words which he had spoken, fell immediately into a heavy sleep.

‘ This is a pretty kettle of fish,’ said Bufton, as he and Leroy sat smoking beside the stove, each

turning a frequent eye on the patient as he slept. 'Of course it was that "Ancient Mariner" who wounded him. He hasn't another enemy in the world, poor chap!'

'The Monster beyond a doubt,' said Leroy. 'He only denied it to save his Andromeda from annoyance and disgrace. He's a good fellow, Billy, isn't he now?'

'He's shaping better than I gave him credit for,' growled Bufton. 'If he'd only shown as much grit a day or two ago as he's showing now, all this cursed business need never have happened.'

'I say!' said Leroy, with a sudden new accent of trouble in his voice, 'his mother must know about this, you know.'

'Of course she must,' said Bufton. 'I hadn't thought of her.'

'She must be told,' said Leroy. 'She'd never forgive us if—if anything serious happened.'

'We'll wait till the morning, anyhow,' said Bufton, 'and see what the doctor says. If he gives a bad report, she must know at once, of course. If the news is good, there might be no reason to tell her at all. She won't miss him much for a week; he often stays away from home as long as that, and in that time he might be fairly on his feet again. And now, look here, old chap, the poor boy mustn't be left alone. He must have somebody with him constantly. I'll stand first

watch till six o'clock, and then I'll rout you out. We must get a nurse for him in the morning.'

Leroy went to bed as bidden, and Bufton, having deftly and silently brewed himself an enormous jorum of coffee, lit up his etching lamp and fell to work, pausing from time to time to listen to the deep, regular breathing of his wounded friend.

Not feeling in the least disposed for rest, he let Leroy sleep on till he awoke as usual at ten o'clock, and laughed good-humouredly at his protests against that 'breach of faith,' as Leroy stigmatized it. The doctor came shortly after that hour, and Somerset awoke as he was bending over him.

'Very satisfactory,' said the doctor; 'skin cool and moist, pulse a leetle stringy—but not so bad, not so bad. No sign of fever. We shall do pretty well, I think, if we can get up our strength again. You had better have a nurse,' he continued to Bufton. 'Half the battle in these cases depends on good nursing. I know an excellent woman who lives near at hand. Shall I send her round?'

At that moment Bess entered the studio. She started at the sight of the group—Somerset lying on the bed and the others standing about him—but at Bufton's warning gesture she repressed the exclamation which rose to her lips.

'Mr. Somerset has met with a bit of an accident,' said Bufton.

‘An accident?’ repeated Bess, with her eyes on Somerset’s white face.

‘Well, yes; but don’t be alarmed, he’s coming round,’ said Bufton, ‘and we’re just arranging about his nurse.’

‘Can’t I be of any use?’ asked Bess. ‘I’m a good nurse, Mr. Bufton. I nursed my brother when he broke his leg, and I attended mother before she died.’

Then and there Bess was installed, and an excellent nurse she proved, quick to read every unspoken wish of her patient, deft and light-handed in all the offices of a sick-room. She had left Tenterden’s Hotel and taken a cheap lodging in a street off Russell Square, and had entered the service of a firm of dressmakers. She sat beside Somerset’s bed stitching through the entire day and half the night, tireless in industry, good spirits and kindliness.

‘By Jove!’ said Bufton to her one afternoon when Somerset had fallen asleep, ‘I’m glad I didn’t meet you twenty years ago.’

‘Why?’ asked Bess, looking up from her sewing in innocent wonder at this curious utterance.

‘I should have carried you off and made you Mrs. William Bufton.’

Bess laughed and blushed a little.

‘It takes two to make a marriage,’ she said.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT THE LOBSTER SMACK.

THERE is an old and wise proverb which tells us that we get through life a day at a time. On Canvey Island, living in the old place, and among the old familiar forms and faces, Annie was proving the truth of the saying. Sick at heart and weary of her life, seeing nothing ahead of her but a dull repetition of the passing day except in those moments when she was haunted by the fear of the apparition of the man who called her wife, Annie watched the hours slip by in a kind of vague and continuous vision. Her brief period of happiness with Somerset, the time when they had been so happy in each other's society, and had looked forward with such gay confidence to the time when they should come together as man and wife, seemed years ago, farther away than the time when she had roamed at her own wild will, as she

did now, about the lonely island, a child, innocent of present care or trouble and free of foreboding for the future. She fell back into the old life, the daily routine of the little inn, with a sort of dull enjoyment, and had been back there scarce eight-and-forty hours before the brief bright interlude of life in London began to look to her like a half-forgotten dream which had never had any place at all in her real experience.

Job Endell still remained away from home, and Annie had extorted a promise from the old woman that her husband should know nothing of her return to the Lobster Smack—a promise which Mrs. Endell faithfully kept. Secretly she was greatly troubled by Annie's strange repulsion against Matt Watson. She could not understand it. Matt had saved the girl's life, had paid for her boarding and education, had in his rough way given a thousand proofs of affection to the girl, and had crowned all his acts of kindness towards her by endowing her with his entire fortune. To her unfastidious sense there was nothing about Matt Watson which was not either interesting or else quite infinitely to his credit; she looked on him, as it was natural that she should look, as a free-hearted, generous specimen of the class to which she herself belonged. There were moments when she thought and

said that Annie must be mad to entertain for him any sentiments but those of gratitude and respect. With a tact she did not often show, she refrained from any allusion to him during the first day or two after Annie's return to the Lobster Smack ; but at last her outraged sense of duty and decorum fairly forced her into speech, and she took Annie roundly to task about her conduct to her benefactor.

‘ Flying in the face o’ Providence and despising what God sends ’e ! That’s what I call it ! You’ve got fine-ladyfied and stuck up wi’ meeting grand folk in London—folks as you’d never ha’ knowed if it hadn’t been for Matt Watson’s money ! Oh, don’t talk to me ! I’m sick at ye—I fairly am ! A man as any girl might be proud on—as good a sailor as ever walked on deck, who has saved your life, and fed ye, and took care on ye for years and years out o’ the kindness of his heart, and your own lawful wedded husband, too, and a man as is regular made o’ money, as could give ye all as any woman’s heart could desire, and asks no better than to do it. Ye ought to think shame, that ye ought, of the way you treat him. And I’ll be a party to it no longer. I’ll sit down this very minute and write to him, and tell him you’re here.’

Annie sat immovable through the story of reproach, but at the last words she rose.

‘You’re not going to do that, mother?’ she asked quite quietly, but with a heightened colour and a burning eye.

‘I am,’ said the old woman. ‘It’s my duty as a Christian creature; and do it I will!’

‘Then listen to me,’ said Annie.

‘I’ve listened to too much o’ your rubbish already, Anniedromedy,’ said Mrs. Endell, sitting down at the desk in the little bar and taking up a pen with an air of decision.

‘Listen to me, I say,’ said Annie again, ‘and mind what I tell you. If Matt comes here to claim me as his wife, as sure as you sit there, as sure as I’m a living woman, I’ll kill myself!’

Mrs. Endell dropped the pen and turned in her seat with a start.

‘Annie!’ she cried. ‘Why, what on earth——’

‘I’ll kill myself!’ repeated Annie. ‘You write to Matt Watson that I’m here, and you’ll murder me as surely as if you threw me into the water and held me down with your own hands!’

Mrs. Endell stared at her, gasping and speechless, and Annie looked back at her with a long steady regard.

‘Sakes alive!’ said the old woman at last, speaking below her breath, ‘I believe she means it!’

‘I do mean it,’ said Annie. ‘I mean it as

much—more than I ever meant anything in my life before. I would kill myself a hundred times over rather than go and live with that man.'

She spoke the words quite quietly, but with a gravity and weight which quite convinced the elder woman of their truth. She broke out anew with reproaches and entreaties, but Annie silenced her with a motion of the hand.

'Never mention his name to me again. If ever you do I shall take it as a sign that I have outstayed my welcome here, and I shall relieve you of my company.'

She turned away, leaving the old woman thoroughly cowed. More days passed by, during which she faithfully obeyed Annie's will, and made no reference to Matt. She even went the length of writing to her husband, making hypocritical inquiries as to whether he or Watson had yet learned of Annie's whereabouts, saying that she hoped he was enjoying his holiday in London, and enclosing him money to enable him to prolong it.

This kind of thing was all very well as a temporary expedient, but it was obviously a situation which could not last for ever, and must sooner or later find its natural end. A morning came which brought a letter from Job Endell, announcing his return to the Lobster Smack that night.

Mrs. Endell managed to hide from Annie the perturbation into which she was thrown by this message, and took counsel with herself during the day as to how she should act. By much thinking she arrived at a course of conduct which satisfied her conscience. She decided that she could do her duty to Matt Watson and yet not break the implicit pledge she had given to Annie. A little time before her husband was due she slipped out of the inn and walked down to the causeway where the rowing-boat landed.

Endell was on board the boat, and jumping out as it touched, gave his wife a hearty smack on both cheeks.

‘Job,’ she said, when they were alone and out of earshot of the boatmen, ‘I’ve got news for ‘e.’

‘Ay?’ said Job; ‘let’s hear it, old woman.’

‘Annie’s back!’

Job started and stopped short.

‘Annie!’ he repeated. ‘When did she come? To-day?’

‘No. She’s been here nigh on a week.’

‘A week?’ cried Job. His wits, never of the quickest, were quite bewildered by the intelligence. ‘Why, you wrote to me only t’other day, askin’ if I’d heard on her.’

‘I know I did, Job. It’s the first time as I’ve deceived ye in all our wedded life, but I couldn’t

help it—but goodness only knows how I've suffered in my conscience!

She told him, in simple, rugged phrases, the experiences of the past few days, and Job listened like a man thunderstruck.

‘Kill herself!’ he said. ‘Rubbish, woman! Maidenish tricks—that’s all it is.’

‘She means it, Job,’ said the old woman. ‘She means it; and what to do is more’n I know. If you’d seen her when she said it, you’d know she meant it.’

‘What the thunder are we to do?’ asked Job, in dire perplexity. ‘Matt Watson’s sure to be down here afore long, and if he finds as it’s us as has been hidin’ the gel away from him, he’ll murder the lot on us. Ye never saw a man in such a state of mind in all your life. He’s just mad about her!’

‘I’ll tell ye what to do, Job—though if ever you tell her as it was me as put ye up to it, I’ll never forgive ye. I can’t stand the worrit of it no longer. I feel as if my head was bursting at times, and I’m that scared and nervous, especially at night, as I wish I was dead. I can’t bear it any longer, and I won’t! You go straight back to London and tell Matt Watson as Annie’s here, and bring him here permiscous-like, as if he wasn’t expectin’ to find her here. And then when they’re

face to face they can fight it out atween 'em, and make some sort of a end of it. For stand things as they're a-going on at present I will not, not for fifty millions of Annies and Matt Watsons, and so I tell ye, straight !'

'That's a powerful good idea, gel,' said Job. 'I'm off back to London, and I shall bring Matt along to-morrow morning.'

So said, so done. Mrs. Endell returned to the Lobster Smack alone, and Job went back to London, where, in a tavern in the neighbourhood of Ratcliffe Highway, he found Matt Watson solacing himself with neat rum, and diligently spelling his way through a newspaper. Watson was sorely puzzled, in fact, by the silence of the papers regarding his attack on Somerset. He had read every sheet he could lay his hands on, and in none of them could he find a word of reference to it. Yet if Somerset had been killed, or even seriously wounded, surely the assault would have been chronicled? Had his blow failed altogether? Bufton's rush upon him had been so sudden that he had had no time to examine the prostrate body of his foe. He had dropped the knife as he ran, but he had paused afterwards to recover his breath, and in the light of a street lamp had found blood upon his hand.

'I couldn't ha' done him much harm after all,'

he said to himself; 'a bit of a flesh-cut I reckon. And yet I seemed to feel the knife bite into him, —— him! I'll be even with him yet!'

'Hullo!' he said, looking up and seeing Job standing before him. 'What brings you back again so soon?'

'I've got news for 'ee, Matt.'

'News? News of—of Annie?' asked the sailor, with glittering eyes.

'Yes. Now, now, take it quiet, lad.'

'What is it? Speak out, ye —— old figure-head, speak out!'

'I've found out where she is,' said Job.

Watson sprang to his feet.

'Where? Where is she?'

'She's down on the island, at the old Lobster Smack. She's been there more'n a week.'

Watson stared at him for a moment in silence, and then turned his eyes away, trembling and murmuring strangely to himself.

'Easy does it,' said Job. 'Take it quiet, ship-mate; it wasn't my old woman's fault. The gel frightened her into deceivin' ye by saying as how she'd drown herself if she gave you the office where she was.'

He told Watson the story much as his wife had told it to him, and Watson listened in alternate rage and mystification, drinking more rum mean-

while. It was all Endell could do to prevent him setting out at once for the island. Between his excitement at the news of Annie's discovery and the raw spirit he swallowed, he was like a maniac. At last emotion and alcohol took their natural effect, and staggering to his bed, he flung himself upon it and fell into a heavy sleep.

When Job Endell descended in the morning to breakfast, which had been provided in the sawdust-strewn room behind the bar, foul with the reek of last night's pipes and rum, Matt Watson did not appear. Inquiry elicited the information that he had risen a couple of hours earlier, and gone out. Job supposed that he had already started down to the island.

'There'll be a blow up when he gets there,' said Job to himself. 'There'll be a devil of a blow up! Taking it fine and large, I'm just as well out of it!'

After which philosophical reflection, he proceeded with his meal, and had well-nigh finished when Matt Watson made his appearance. He looked but little the worse for his excess of the previous night.

'Tell me again what the old woman told ye,' he said. He lit his pipe, settled his elbows on the table and listened intently, nodding his head from time to time to check off the details of the

narrative. When Endell had finished he gave a series of nods, with a curious expression of cunning, and after smoking in silence for another minute or two, rose to his feet.

‘We’ll go down together,’ he said.

During the walk to the railway-station and the journey in the train he kept silent, and it was not until they were picking their way over the muddy shore that he spoke.


‘I’ve got my plan,’ he said then, ‘and I think it’ll work if it’s managed proper. I met Bill Peters last night, cap’n of the *Dolphin*, as is lyin’ in the roads out yonder. She starts for Plymouth to-night, and from Plymouth she goes to Panama, and then down the coast of South Ameriky. She’ll be away a year, and I’m goin’ with her.’ He nudged Endell meaningly, and the latter looked at him with a puzzled face.

‘You’re goin’ with her?’ repeated the old man.

‘First mate, with a share in the profits of the voyage,’ said Watson, with a strange look and another nudge.

He looked so cunning and self-satisfied that Endell stopped short, staring at him and scratching the back of his head in sheer bewilderment.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘you mean something, I suppose, but if I know what you mean, sink me !’



‘Then you’re a greater fool than I thought you,’ said Watson, and nudged him again.

‘Can’t ye speak straight?’ said the old man. ‘What d’ye mean?’

‘You ain’t over spry, Job,’ said Watson, ‘and that’s a fact. My plan’s this: I’m a-again’ to meet Anniedromedy as mild as milk. I’m a-again’ to say to her as I’ve come to see as it was a mistake to marry her, and I’m a-again’ to leave her and give her her liberty again, with you and the missis for witnesses. Then we has a parting glass together, and I start out for the *Dolphin*, where my traps is already. You goes along with me to see me off, and then you go back to the Lobster Smack and fetch the old woman.’

A light broke in on Endell’s mind.

‘By the Holy!’ he cried, slapping his thigh, ‘but you have got a head of your own, Matt. But I tell ’ee,’ he continued, after a pause, ‘it’s dangerous. That gel’s a reg’lar wild-cat when she’s aroused. She’s the only creetur as I ever met as could frighten my missis; and she has frightened her—she’s scared her well-nigh out of her wits.’

‘I’ll manage her,’ said Watson, ‘once we get to close quarters. Now, are you sure as ye understand? Bill Peters is the man I’ve signed to go with; fust mate is my quality, with a share in the profits of the voyage; and the *Dolphin* now a-lyin’

in the roads, and starting to-night for Plymouth, Panama, and the coast of South Ameriky, is the vessel. You was by when the bargain was struck, and you back me up in all I say.'

Endell promised acquiescence in the plan, not without some dismal forebodings of failure, which he kept to himself, having a wholesome dread of his companion's wild temper.

They arrived at the Lobster Smack and passed through the passage leading to the little back parlour, in which Annie and Mrs. Endell were seated together. At Watson's entrance the girl rose, and standing with her hands on the back of her chair, looked at him with the aspect of a trapped animal which, feeling itself in the toils, still means making a last fight for life and liberty. The old woman rose too.

'Annie,' she said warningly and imploringly ;
'Annie, my gel !'

She had had her own personal fears of how Watson might take her share of the deception practised upon him, and turned her eyes to his face as if fascinated.

'There's nothin' to be frightened about,' said Watson gruffly. 'Sit down, Annie ! Sit down, mother ! I'm only here to say good-bye. I shall be far enough away from ye by this time to-morrow !'

‘To say good-bye!’ Annie echoed the words in a barely audible voice, and with an accent of complete surprise.

‘That’s what I’m here for,’ continued Watson. ‘I’ve come to see, Annie, as it’s all been a mistake ; I was wrong to tie a young gel to myself. I was wrong to go away and leave ye all these years. Havin’ stopped away so long, I was wrong to come back. I ought to ha’ stopped away for good, and let you go on thinkin’ I was dead. I’ve had time to think it all out, and it seems to me as the very best thing as I can do, to make up for all the mistakes as I’ve made, is to go away again and leave things quiet.’

He kept his eyes on Annie’s face as he spoke, and the glad light which shone from it tore his heart with a pang of anguish, which almost broke down the assumed calm to which he had schooled his voice and expression. He had had little practice in the arts of duplicity, having pretty generally been able to get what he wanted by the power of a furious temper and great personal strength. But his mad passion for Annie overrode all others, and enabled him to act a part quite foreign to his real nature.

‘And so,’ he went on, ‘I take ye, Job Endell and Mrs. Endell, to witness as I give up all claim on Anniedromedy Watson here present, as my

wedded wife. I start to-night—Job will tell ye, as was by when the bargain was struck and the papers was signed—on board the *Dolphin*, Cap'n Bill Peters, now lyin' in the roads, for a voyage to South Ameriky. I shan't come back to these here latitudes for a year, anyhow; p'r'aps I shan't never come back at all. But here or there, at home or abroad, Anniedromedy Watson as aforesaid is no wife of mine. What I've already given her I hope she'll keep—and that's all!

The first amazing shock of delight had passed, and Annie's heart had had time to realize the generosity of the man she had hated and repulsed. She hunted her bewildered brain for words in which to thank and bless him, but could find none, and in the extremity of her joy and thankfulness and admiration she crossed the room, seized his hand, and held it trembling in her own. He shuddered, forced a curious laugh, and drew his hand away.

'No nonsense, Annie!' he said hoarsely; 'is it a bargain?'

Again she placed her hand in his, and for a moment he seemed about to break down under the stress of his passionate emotion.

'I am so sorry,' she murmured, touched in spite of herself by the sight of his distress.

Again he forced a laugh, and drew his hand across his lips. But still his eyes never left hers, but watched her as if under strange fascination. His swarthy cheeks were drawn as if in pain, and his mouth trembled convulsively.

‘And now, mate,’ he cried, with a wild effort at mirth, ‘bring out the old case-bottle, and we’ll have a glass together before I go aboard. Don’t you mind me, Annie, my gel; you get along to bed, and leave Job and me and the missis to settle up accounts.’

After lingering for a minute, as if eager to thank him for the strange turn which his affection for her had taken, Annie escaped to her bedroom at the top of the house. There the mad mingling in her bosom of many emotions found relief in a copious flow of tears. There were moments when her gratitude to the rude, wild man who had given her back her liberty almost moved her to return to him and place her hand in his as a reward of his magnanimity; but those brief flashes of softer feeling could not overcome the all-mastering repugnance he still inspired. An hour passed by, and then, standing on the top of the stairs, she heard voices from the lobby below. It was clear to her that Matt Watson was departing, and, after a brief hesitation, she slowly descended, eager to bid him a last good-bye, and to assure him again

of her deep sorrow at the fatality which had come between them.

To her surprise, she found Mrs. Endell alone in the parlour, wearing her bonnet and cloak.

‘He’s gone,’ said Mrs. Endell, as Annie looked round the room.

‘Gone?’ echoed Annie.

‘Yes. “It isn’t worth while to trouble her,” he said, when I offered to call you down. “Say good-bye to her for me.” So he’s gone, and Job and me is going to see him off as far as Gravesend.’

‘Going with him? So late at night?’

‘Yes, Annie. They’re waiting for me in the skiff down yonder. You won’t be afeared to bide in the house? We’ll be back early in the morning. You see, my lass, there’s a heap o’ things Matt wants to settle with Job and me after he sails; and more’n that, the poor chap’s drefful cut up, and it’ll be a kindness to go with him to the ship’s side.’

The old woman walked to the door, and joined the two men who were waiting for her on the shore. Annie saw their dark figures in the distance; then she heard a murmur of voices and a splash of oars. She listened till the sounds died away; then she returned to the house.

She was not afraid to be alone, but she locked and bolted the doors, both front and back, before

she went up to her bedroom. Then she sat there in the darkness for a long time. She could hardly be said to think ; her brain was in a dull, dim whirl ; she sat as in a trance. At last she rose and undressed ; but before she stepped into bed she locked and bolted the door of her room. For a long time she lay awake, thinking, thinking. She felt relieved and free ; but mingling with the sense of relief was pity for the man whom she had used so untenderly. At last she fell asleep. She had scarcely done so, when there was the creak of a stealthy footstep on the stair.

CHAPTER XXV.

FACE TO FACE.

HER eyes were closed, and she was breathing heavily in troubled sleep, as the footsteps came nearer and nearer, ascending the narrow flight of stairs that led to her bedroom-door. At the same time there was a low, moaning sound all over the house, as if a window somewhere had been left open, admitting the bleak air of the night.

The room where Annie lay was no longer quite dark, for the moon had broken through the clouds, and was throwing ghostly beams upon the bed. The night was fine, but the wind was rising in the north-west, with threatenings of storm.

The footsteps still ascended, while Annie still slumbered on. At last they paused before the door, and had she been awake she would have heard a heavy breathing outside. Then the

handle of the door moved, as if turned softly from without, but both bolt and lock were firm. Finally, the handle was turned more quickly and impatiently, and the door was shaken. The sound awoke the sleeping girl. She started, listened, sat up in bed, and gazed wildly towards the door.

‘Who’s there?’ she cried, while her heart stood still within her.

There was no reply, but, listening intently, she was distinctly conscious of something stirring outside. With a cry she sprang from her bed.

‘Who’s there?’ she cried again, in terror.

There was a pause, during which she was conscious of someone moving on the landing, which creaked beneath the tread of heavy feet. Then the handle of the door was shaken, and a voice said :

‘Open the door ; it’s me—Matt Watson!’

Matt Watson! Her heart stood still again, and the blood ran cold within her. What brought him back there in the stillness of the night, at the very moment when she had thought that he had passed out of her life for ever? A sudden fear possessed her that some trick had been played upon her, and——

‘Don’t be afraid, Anniedromedy,’ he whispered. ‘The missis forgot to tell ye something, and she’s

waitin' for ye below. Come down and speak to her just a minute ; she won't keep ye.'

'I can't come down ; I'm undressed,' she answered.

'Ye must!' returned the man, while the door shook and trembled as if a strong shoulder had been pressed against it.

'I won't ; it's a trick ! Go away, or I'll throw myself out of the window!' And so saying, she moved back, with lips panting and dilated eyes, till she stood in her long white nightdress in the full gleam of the moonlight.

The man seemed to hesitate ; then he said :

'If I go away, will you come down? There's naught to be afraid on ; no one will harm ye. No need to dress—jest throw on a wrap. There, my gel, I'm goin' !'

She heard his heavy feet passing down the stairs. She stood trembling and wondering what to do. After all, why need she be afraid? The explanation of his return seemed simple ; it doubtless concerned some last message which Mrs. Endell wished to deliver to her in his presence. He himself had released her, freely and voluntarily, and it was unlikely that his mind had changed. At the worst, the old woman and Job would be there to protect her, if the need arose.

She looked out of the window. All was dark

and silent without, save for the fitful gleams of moonlight on the water and the low murmuring of the wind. She had never felt afraid in the lonely house before, but now a nameless terror seemed to possess her. Nevertheless, she drew on a petticoat, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and prepared to descend. Then she drew back the bolt, turned the key softly, and, opening the door a few inches, peered out and listened. All was dark and still, but, listening again, she seemed to catch the sound of voices from below.

‘Are you there, mother?’ she called, stepping out cautiously on to the landing and looking down. There was no answer, but again she caught the sound of a voice or voices. Naturally brave and fearless, she drew herself together and prepared to descend ; but first she returned to her room, struck a match, and lit a candle ; then, holding the light in one hand, she descended the stairs. Her feet were bare, her hair fell loosely on her shoulders, and she held the shawl closely around her as she descended.

On the landing beneath she paused and listened again, and as she did so a gust of wind blew out the candle. But, gazing downward, she saw the glimmering of a light in the passage below. This gave her fresh courage, and she crept on.

She had almost reached the passage when

she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. She looked round and caught a glimpse in the darkness of a form and face emerging on the landing above her. With a low cry she ran on and rushed into the parlour, on the table of which a lamp was dimly burning. To her amaze and terror there was no one there.

As she turned to escape from the room, Matt Watson appeared in the doorway, looking white and wild, with his black eyes fixed on hers, and a strange smile upon his face.

She shrank back with a faint scream.

‘Let me pass!’ she cried. ‘I was right. It’s a trick after all! Where is Mrs. Endell?’

‘She’s up yonder in Gravesend, and Job along with her,’ answered Matt Watson quietly. ‘You needn’t scream or cry, my gel, for there’s no one here to mind ye. We’re alone in the house, my dear. Yes,’ he said, with the same strange smile, ‘I’m alone in this house to-night, along o’ my *wife*.’

He entered the room, closed the door, and stood with his back against it, with folded arms. As she shrank in horror from him, she saw the great earrings in his ears, and the tattoo-marks on his breast, from which his shirt collar fell open, and on his powerful hands. He on his side seemed to regard her with a sort of savage admiration,

looking with the same curious smile on her shrinking form, her bare feet, the trembling hands that clutched the shawl and held it round her, and on the hair that fell loosely on her shoulders.

Helpless, terrified, like a trapped bird, she shrank away towards the fireplace, placing the table between them.

‘I’m *not* your wife!’ she cried. ‘You gave me my liberty. Matt! Matt! Let me go! Don’t be so cruel! If you touch me, if you come near me, I shall go mad!’

The smile on the man’s face faded; a pained, wistful expression took its place. He drew the back of his right hand across his mouth—a gesture peculiar to him—and then pointed to a chair by the fire.

‘Sit down there, Anniedromedy, while I talk to ye. I’m not going to harm ye if ye do as I bid ye; but don’t ’e rouse the devil in me to-night, or God knows what I may do!’

‘Will you swear not to touch me?’ she panted.

‘I’ll swear naught,’ he answered; ‘but you’ve got to do my bidding. Sit down, my gel, sit down.’

She sank into the chair, huddling herself up in it like a scared child. He moved from the door, threw himself into a chair on the other side of the table, and leaning forward, with his chin supported by his hands, gazed at her steadily.

‘Understand, Anniedromedy, there’s no way out o’ this but one. The doors are all locked and bolted, Job and the old woman are far away, and you and me are alone together for the first time this many a year. Now you’re going to tell me fair and square the meaning of all this. I want to hear it from your own mouth, honey, without one word of lies. Ye hear? Well, what’s wrong? Why did ye run away from me as if I was pison? I never did you no harm that I knows of, and I don’t quite understand why the sight o’ me should turn so sick on your stomach. But there’s something maybe you can explain? If ye can, out with it. I’m here to-night to find out what you’ve got to say.’

As he spoke thus in a low, almost gentle voice, and without the slightest sign of violence towards her, Annie felt her courage come back. After all, she thought, he seemed reasonable and rational, and she might be able to temporize with him. Otherwise it was clear that there was no escape; she was completely at his mercy, for no living soul ever came by night to that solitary place.

‘Well, my gel, I’m waiting to hear ye,’ said the man after a long silence, during which he continued to regard her steadfastly. ‘Have ye lost your tongue?’

She forced a feeble laugh and murmured :

‘I don’t like you in that way, Matt, that’s all. I know you’ve been very good to me, more good than I deserve ; but I don’t want to be your wife.’

His face contracted as if in pain, and once more he drew the back of his hand nervously across his mouth.

‘Ye don’t like me in that way ! Ye don’t want to be my wife !’ he repeated in a low voice. ‘Well, there wasn’t much need to tell me that. But why, my gel, why ? That’s what I want to know. You used to like me well enough when you was a gel, and I—I’ve only had one thought all these years—how to bring fortune and good luck to the little wife I left behind.’

His voice choked and his eyes grew dim. What could she answer him ? Every word he uttered was only too true.

‘Out there in Ameriky,’ he continued, ‘I worked night and day till I made my pile and became a rich man. Why ? Not for my own sake, but for yours. When I was struck down by the fever and thought that I was booked for Kingdom Come, I took care as you should never want. I made a lady on ye—didn’t I ?—and gave ye all I had to give ; and afterwards, when I come back, I thought—I thought that maybe my little gel might give me a welcome and be a bit glad to

see me. Ye wasn't glad, Anniedromedy ; ye was sorry. My little gel, my wife that ought to ha' bin, was sick and sorry that I wasn't *dead*.'

'No, no, Matt ; it isn't true !' cried Annie, touched to the quick and bursting into tears. 'I wasn't sorry ! I didn't wish you dead ! I was only frightened ! I——'

He held up his hand and interrupted her.

'Frightened o' *me* ? Frightened o' the man as plucked ye from the sea when ye was a babby, and had given ye all he had in the world, as if ye was his own begotten child ? That's queer, very queer ! Why should you be frightened of Matt Watson, unless'—here his face changed, and the old savage look came back into his eyes—'unless there was someone who had come between you and me, and had taught ye to hate me, and to want me dead and buried out o' the way.'

'You're wrong, quite wrong,' she replied. 'It wasn't that. What I did, I did of my own free will.'

'That's a lie !' he cried, smiting the table with his fist, and leaning over towards her with flashing eyes. 'There *was* someone, and I seen him one night with his mouth to yourn. It was him that come between us, Anniedromedy, curse him !'

She sprang up terrified, but he motioned her fiercely to keep still.

‘Well, that’s over. We needn’t take any count of him. He’s paid his reckoning, and won’t trouble us no more.’

‘What do you mean?’ she cried, a new terror seizing her.

‘I mean that I’ve done for your fine gentleman,’ he replied. ‘I followed him one night, and put my knife into him for luck, as I’d put my knife into *you* if I thought you and him had gone too far.’

‘You coward!’ she exclaimed, rising erect and facing him, with all the hot blood mounting to her face. ‘If you dared to lay a finger upon Mr. Somerset——’

‘I don’t know about his name, but I tell ’e I’m square with him. It was a bad day for him when he come atween you and me.’

She sprang towards the door. Her shawl fell off, leaving her neck and shoulders bare. But almost before she could utter a cry, he had seized her by the wrists, and was holding her as in a vice.

‘Let me go!’ she moaned; ‘let me go!’

‘I was right, then,’ he hissed between his clenched teeth. ‘If it hadn’t been for him—that doll-faced, lily-fingered fool——’

‘It would have made no difference,’ she gasped, defiant amidst all her weakness. ‘I could never have cared for you, Matt Watson. Even when I

was a little child I was afraid of you—your touch made me sick ; but now I know what you have done I hate you ! I hate you more than I ever hated you before !’

But his arms were round her, and though she tried to escape he held her to him, raining kisses on her lips and eyes, while she fought and cried and sobbed in his embrace.

‘ My Annie ! my little wife !’ he murmured. ‘ Prettier than ever, my beauty !’

She had almost fainted, when the terror awakened by his words seemed to give her new strength. With a shriek she tore herself free at last. He fell back laughing, and pushing the wild hair out of his bloodshot eyes. Then, as he approached her again with open arms, she sprang to the door, opened it, and flew out into the passage and up the stairs.

He gazed after her for a moment, laughed again, and shrugged his shoulders ; then he began to follow her in the darkness, slowly, cautiously, like a wild beast certain of its prey.

On reaching the first landing and hearing him following slowly, she ran into the bedroom on the first floor—the very room which Somerset had occupied during his stay at the inn. Swift as lightning she closed and locked the door ; then, running to the window, she saw to her surprise

that it was wide open. Then for the first time it occurred to her that Matt Watson must have entered that way, all the doors having been locked and barred before she retired to rest. With the nimbleness and dexterity of a sailor, he had managed to climb up—how, she scarcely realized, but it had been done. The window was not very high above the ground, and outside it swung, attached to an iron support, the old sign. If he had entered, might she not escape, that way?

The moon was now hidden and the wind was blowing strongly, with great gusts of sleet and rain. The sign swung and creaked. As she stood at the window, looking down, the rain swept in and soaked her to the skin. The shawl had fallen from her in her flight, and all she wore was her white nightdress, and the petticoat she had drawn on over her lower limbs. She sobbed and shivered, gazing out into the windy darkness.

Then she heard the room door shaken, and the man's voice calling her name :

‘Annie! Anniedromedy!’

She did not answer, but she leaped out over the window-sill preparatory to swinging herself out and dropping to the ground, with the certainty of being maimed and perhaps killed. Heavy blows rained upon the door, and then, as if with the

full force of the man's strength, it was nearly forced open.

'Are ye there, my gel?' the deep voice said.
'Can't ye speak?'

She crept towards the door.

'Listen to me, Matt Watson!' she cried.

'I'm listening,' he answered.

'You may break the door open, but before you can lay a finger on me I shall have leaped out. The window's open ready. I mean what I say.'

The door ceased to move. The man seemed deliberating.

'Don't 'e be a fool,' he said presently. 'I won't harm 'e. Let me in, my gel.'

'I'll never trust you again,' she replied. 'You lied to me before, and you're lying to me now! And if it's true what ye told me, that you've harmed my friend, I'll never forgive you, Matt Watson! You may kill me, as you say you've killed him, but you can't do more than that. Do you hear?'

'I hear right enough,' he answered with an oath, 'but I'm coming in, for all that;' and again the door shook under his blows.

She ran to the window, ready to spring out, as she had threatened, the moment he entered; then, to her amazement, she heard voices beyond her in

the darkness. Mad and terrified, she screamed aloud.

‘Lobster Smack ahoy!’ cried a clear voice. ‘Who’s that up there? Anything wrong?’

‘Yes, yes!’ she cried. ‘Open the door! break it open! Save me! save me!’

As she spoke she saw the figures of several men gathering below her. The door no longer moved. Matt Watson was also listening.

‘Who are you, mistress?’ a voice cried again, ‘and what’s the matter? Can’t you come down and open the door?’

‘I can’t come!’ she panted. ‘He’s there; he’s waiting for me! For God’s sake don’t go away!’

The men seemed whispering together and consulting. At last the man who had already spoken spoke again:

‘Don’t be afraid, mistress. We’re here, and no one shall harm you. We’re on night duty, and rowed in from the river to get shelter from the storm.’

As he spoke some of his companions were knocking at the inn door and demanding admittance.

‘Who’s in the house?’ demanded the man. ‘Isn’t Job Endell at home?’

‘No; he’s away at Gravesend,’ answered Annie.

‘And who is it you’re afraid of, my woman?’

She didn't reply, for she heard Matt's voice calling to her again:

'Anniedromedy!'

'Yes?'

'Hold your tongue if you love your life! I'm going down to let them in.'

With a gasp of relief she heard him creeping down the stairs, while the rain of blows on the outer door still continued. She crept across the room and listened eagerly. Then she heard the bolts shot back, the chain released, and the tramp of feet in the passage. She threw the room door open and ran downstairs, forgetting in her excitement how slightly she was clad; and then, in the light which streamed from the lighted lamp in the parlour, she saw that the men who had entered were river police, wrapped in dripping oilskins, and accompanied by two boatmen, also in oilskin coats. Standing in the shadow, gazing at them with angry, bloodshot eyes, was Matt Watson.

The leader of the party, a powerful, thick-set man with a beard, addressed her, and she recognised the voice she had heard before.

'Now then, my girl, what's up? Why did you scream out like that, as if you were in peril of your life?'

She glanced at Matt Watson, and saw his stern eyes fixed upon her. He had not uttered a word.

‘It’s—it’s nothing,’ she replied hysterically. ‘I was afraid, and—and I’m glad you’ve come, that’s all.’

She led the way into the parlour, and the leader of the men followed her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A RESPITE.

Now that help had come so unexpectedly, Annie quickly recovered her self-possession. Lying on the floor, where it had fallen, was the shawl which had slipped from her in her effort to escape ; she stooped and lifted it, throwing it over her shoulders. The man looked at her in wonder.

‘A lonesome place this for a pretty girl like you,’ he said. ‘Who’s the man with you? Was it him you were afraid of, missie?’

She glanced round and saw Matt Watson, still silent, with his eyes fixed on hers, standing in the doorway.

‘Never mind that now,’ she answered. ‘How did you come to be passing this way at this time of night?’

‘Well, missie, we’d been having a chase down river, and my mates and I were tired out and in

need of a rest ; so when the storm came down, we made for shelter in the old inn, and I reckon we'll stay here, if you don't mind, till morning.'

Here the officer's eyes fell on Matt Watson.

'Who are *you*?' he demanded sharply. 'What's up between you and this young woman?'

'Nothing, mate,' answered Matt in a low voice, showing his white teeth as he spoke.

'Here, let's have a look at you. A sailor by the cut of your jib! What are you doing at the Lobster Smack?'

'If you want to know,' answered Matt quietly, 'I'm a-looking after my wife.'

'Your wife! Do you mean this young woman?'

'I mean my wife, mate—Anniedromedy Watson. Whoever you are, I warn you to mind your own business, and not to come between us. It may be worse for you if you do.'

'Do you threaten, you ugly blackavised son of a squeegee!' cried the officer, while his men looked on, laughing. 'D'ye know I'm a police officer and within my rights in asking you to give an account of yourself?'

'I don't know and I don't care,' answered Matt fiercely.

'Then I'll learn you.—Here, lads, take a hold of him, and if he gives any more of his jaw, put the handcuffs on him.'

Matt's hand reached for the knife in his belt, but before he could stir he was seized by the police. He made no further attempt to resist, but still kept his eyes fixed on Annie.

'Now, my girl,' said the officer. 'Do you charge this man? If you do, I'll take him into custody, for I've seen enough to know that you're in deadly fear of him.'

Trembling still, Annie looked at Matt again and their eyes met. She returned no answer.

'He says he's your husband. Is that true?'

'It's true, and it's false,' she replied.

'That's a rum telling!' exclaimed the officer, while his men laughed again. 'Either he is your husband or he isn't. Which is it?'

'I don't know. I—I was married to him many years ago.'

'If you're married to him he's your husband, isn't he? Well, let that pass. Has he been maltreating you? Do you charge him?'

'No,' answered Annie. 'I'm not afraid of him now. He hasn't harmed me. I don't think he meant to harm me. I was afraid of him, that's all.'

'All right. It's your affair, not ours. You may let the man go, lads, but keep an eye on him; don't leave him. Now, my girl, if you'll take my advice, you'll go back to bed. You needn't be

afraid ; me and my men are going to make ourselves snug here till daylight. But before you go, I'll ask you to get us a bottle of rum out of the bar, for which I'll pay you in the morning.'

Quite at her ease now, Annie ran to fetch the bottle of spirits and glasses, while the men, throwing off their oilskins, made themselves comfortable by the parlour fire. Matt made no attempt to follow or molest her, but sat quite quietly by the police and the boatmen, with whom he soon began to converse.

When Annie returned, the officer, after filling his glass and pushing the bottle to his men, looked at her admiringly and said :

'Your health, missie ; and I hope you and your husband will make it up.'

Annie flushed crimson.

'I've your promise. You're going to stay here till morning?' she said.

'Make your mind easy,' was the answer. 'The night's ugly and we're too snug here to want to go further. I'll warn you before we go afloat again.'

She lingered for a few minutes, looking dubiously at Matt Watson. Without raising his eyes, Matt said presently :

'Go to bed, my gel ; I shan't come near you.'

She lighted a candle and carried it with her upstairs to the room at the top of the house. Once

there, she locked and bolted the door again, and placed the light on a chair beside her bed. Then she walked to the window and looked out. The rain was falling in torrents and the wind had risen to half a gale. All without was darkness and tumult. Far away through the sheets of rain she saw the lights gleaming and passing on the Great River.

She knew that she was safe now, at least for a time. The police were there, and would see that no wrong or insult came to her. But her whole spirit was shaken by the ordeal through which she had passed, and her passionate indignation found vent in a torrent of tears. It was clear to her now that the Endells had left her there at Matt Watson's mercy, trusting and believing that the result of their treachery would be a final reconciliation between herself and her husband. Her soul revolted against their cruelty and unkindness, and she vowed again to herself that she would never yield. When daylight came she would leave the place. If Matt followed her and continued to make her life a torment, she would carry out her old threat and destroy herself. That would be the only means of escape left to her, and she would take it without hesitation.

She listened at the door, and heard the sound of laughing and talking from below ; then she

threw herself sobbing by the bed, and prayed to God for help in her dire distress. When she rose from her knees she was somewhat calmer. Only one memory lay like a black shadow on her mind—the memory of what Matt Watson had said concerning the man she loved. Had he spoken the truth? Had he really taken Somerset's life, as he asserted? She did not believe it; she felt certain that he had been lying, but nevertheless she felt strangely anxious concerning her lover's fate, and determined to ascertain at any cost the truth concerning him.

At last, wearied out and sick at heart, she threw herself on the bed. Lying there, she still heard the reassuring sounds from below, and after a little while she fell asleep. She was awakened by a loud knocking at her door. She started up in terror, thinking that her tormentor was again there, but a voice from without reassured her—the voice of the officer of the river police.

‘Now then, missie, it's break of day, and we must soon be off.’

It was daybreak indeed, and the thin, rainy beams of the wintry dawn were filling the room. She sprang out of bed, called to the officer that she would be down directly, and then proceeded to dress, first washing away from her face the traces of last night's tears. Then she put on the

hat and sealskin cloak which she had worn on her journey from London, and which were hanging in the room, for the thought had come to her that she could go away under the protection of the police, and so escape Matt Watson.

When she descended she found some of the men gathered round the door, while others were down on the shingle baling out a large rowing-boat, in which they had come to the anchorage. The head of the party was in the parlour waiting for her. She looked round for Matt Watson, but he was nowhere to be seen.

‘Well, ma’am, I’m glad you slept comfortably,’ said the officer, after a surprised look at her dress ; for she looked strangely refined and lady-like, in contrast to her appearance overnight. ‘We must be off to Gravesend, but before I go I want a few words with you.’

‘I wish you to let me go with you,’ returned Annie quietly.

‘D’ye mean it?’ asked the officer, with a smile. ‘But what about your husband?—if he is your husband, as it appears he holds himself to be.’

‘I cannot stop here ; I wish to go away,’ said Annie.

‘All right, if that’s your fancy, but you’ll excuse me for saying it’s rather queer. Come now ! if you’re really married to the man, as he says you

are, can't you settle your mind to make the best of your bargain?'

But Annie set her lips together and shook her head. The upshot of the conversation was that the officer agreed to give her a place in the police-boat, and to escort her as far as Gravesend.

As they walked from the inn together she came face to face with the man she feared. He looked strangely sad and crestfallen; his cheeks were sunken, his lips trembled, and his clothes were soaked with rain. At first she shrank back, then, yielding to an impulse of contrition, she held out her hand. He did not take it, but looked at her with a gaze so wistful, so despairing, that her heart bled for him.

'Good-bye, Matt,' she said. 'I'm going away. I want you to try to forget me, to——'

'Are you really going, my gel?' he asked. 'Are you really and truly bent on going?'

'Yes,' she answered.

'Then let me have jest one word with you before you go. If you do that, I'll promise never to trouble you again.'

She looked at the officer.

'Let me speak to him,' she said. 'I'm not afraid.'

And while the officer somewhat dubiously and suspiciously walked a few paces aside, she stood

and looked sadly at her husband, waiting to hear what he had to say. But he did not speak ; he seemed too smitten down and overcome. His face twitched, and again and again he drew his hand nervously across his mouth.

‘Oh, Matt!’ she cried, ‘forgive me! I’m cruel! I can’t bear to see you take on like this!’

He turned his eyes upon her with a long wistful gaze, and she saw that the tears were rolling down his cheeks ; but when she put out her hands as if to take his, he shrank back at first as if from a blow, then, dashing the tears from his eyes with a nervous laugh, he seized her hands in his and thrust his wild face close to hers.

‘It’s maybe the last look I’ll have of my little gel in this world,’ he said, while his hot breath came and went upon her cheek, ‘so don’t you be angry with me, and don’t you be afraid. I’ve been thinking it all over out there in the storm while you was asleep ; and at first I was mad against ye, and all my thought was to take my revenge upon ye for what you’d done. But now I don’t feel like that. I feel too sick and tired and ’shamed. I ought to have knowed you could never care for me ; I ought to have behaved myself decent, seeing as ’twasn’t your fault altogether, but the will of God Almighty. Lord! Lord! what a fool I’ve been!’

‘It is my fault, Matt,’ sobbed Annie, ‘and I’m an ungrateful girl ; but I couldn’t live with you like that.’

‘O’ course you couldn’t, Anniedromedy ; I see that plain enough now,’ the man answered ; and as he spoke he released her, and, turning his eyes away, looked sadly and wearily towards the river.

The masts of a great ship, which was being towed seaward, appeared above the sea-wall, moving slowly southward, and he watched them quietly as he continued :

‘I thought I was a man, Annie, but now I see I’m only a complainin’ fool. I was drunk, too, last night, and I’ve been drunk too, off and on, ever since I come home ; but I’m sober this mornin’, and so I want to have it out with you before I get drunk again and change my mind. My gel, ever since I can remember you’ve been more to me than meat and drink, clothes and fresh air—the light of my eyes and the pulse of my heart. When you was a little child I took ye and sheltered ye, and thinks I to myself, “Now I’ve got something to live for.” And I did my best for ye, afloat and ashore, didn’t I? And afterwards, when I made a fortun’, it was all for my little Annie. So I thought when I come home, being only a blamed fool, as I’ve told ye, that you’d maybe be glad to see me, and that you

and me would be happy together on the money I'd earned. I soon saw there was something wrong. I was a kill-joy, Annie, and I ought to have stayed away and died out there in Ameriky. 'Twould have been better for me—better a heap for you. But it wasn't to be, my gel—it wasn't to be !'

Annie felt the very heart within her breaking with pity as she listened.

'Don't talk like that, Matt! You make me feel the wickedest girl in all the world. It's not too late. I'll stay with you ; I'll try to care for you ; I'll——'

He stopped her with an impatient motion of his hand.

'No, my gel,' he answered. 'You'll go your ways, and I'll go mine. If you did what you say, 'twould only breed more trouble ; it's best as it is. I'm like a sick man ; I don't like my physic, but I've got to take it. But before you go I want to tell you this: the money I've made is yourn—every penny. I earned it for you ; I saved it for you, and I've no use for it. So if you'll let Job Endell know where you be, I'll make that straight.'

'I can't take your money !' cried Annie. 'It would be too shameful, after the way I've treated you——'

‘That’s another coil o’ ropes,’ returned Watson, with a sad smile. ‘If ye don’t take the money—if ye don’t let me be a friend to ye—I shall think ye hate and loathe me more’n I want to believe. It will be a pleasure to me to think that arter all I haven’t wasted my time, and that someone will be the comfortabler for my saving.’

‘I won’t take it! I won’t take it!’

‘My God, you will though!’ the man exclaimed, with a touch of his old fierceness. ‘It’s yourn, not mine; it would blister my hands if I touched it. If ye like,’ he added, ‘ye may count on it as some payment for having robbed ye of your fancy man.’

Her face went white.

‘It was true, then? You were not lying to me? You have dared to harm him?’

‘I see you know who I mean,’ he returned, with a grim nod. ‘Yes, I’ve settled that reckoning, I fancy.’

She shrank back from him with an exclamation of horror.

‘Then I’ll never forgive you! Oh, you—you coward!’

‘I suppose it was a bit cowardly, but I couldn’t help it, and he deserved it. At any rate, it’s no use crying over spilt milk. Well, good-bye!’

He held out his hand, but she pushed it from her passionately, crying :

‘If you have harmed him, as you say, you shall be punished. I will denounce you—I will!’

He shrugged his shoulders, and spat upon the ground.

‘All right, my gel,’ he said, ‘as soon as ye like; I’m ready. It don’t matter much to me now what becomes of me, and if it’s a hanging job—why, it’s as good to hang as to drown! If I can’t have the one thing I wanted, all the rest don’t count. So good-bye again, and God bless ye, Anniedromedy!’

He turned and walked away from her slowly, his eyes upon the ground. But she ran after him.

‘I don’t believe what you’ve told me,’ she panted. ‘Tell me it isn’t true, and I’ll stay with you.’

‘It’s God’s truth. But p’r’aps he ain’t dead, only hurt a bit. I hope it’s so, for your sake.’

‘Oh, Matt, Matt,’ she sobbed, ‘there was never anything wrong between us. But he was kind to me, I liked him, and—and if any harm has come to him through me, it will break my heart!’

He placed his hand gently on her shoulder.

‘So bad as that?’ he said huskily. ‘Well, then, I’m sorry. It warn’t your fault, my gel; we can’t help our likes and dislikes—and he was a young, handsome chap, and me nigh old enough to be your father. Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ she moaned; and, still sobbing

hysterically, bent forward and kissed him on the cheek. Then she ran down to the boat, where the men were waiting.

Matt Watson stood and watched her go. Then he saw her lifted into the boat, and seated by the officer in the stern. As the boat rowed rapidly away, he noticed that she did not look back, but was seated with her face hidden in her hands. He stood like a marble man, watching the boat until it disappeared; then, with his teeth set tight, and his face as ghastly as a mask of death, he walked slowly and wearily in the direction of the Lobster Smack.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT THE STUDIO.

THE wound which Somerset had received from his midnight assailant, being neither deep nor given in a vital part, would have healed with tolerable rapidity save for the state of mental tumult into which the young man had been thrown by the disappearance of Annie. As it was, fever ensued, signs of blood-poisoning supervened, and the recovery was very tardy. However, Bess proved a capital nurse, and both Bufton and Leroy were constant in their attentions, so that at last the patient was able to get up from bed, and be made comfortable in the one arm-chair of the studio.

His mother, distracted with anxiety when she heard the news of his illness, came to see him daily. The good lady was a little shocked at his surroundings, and would gladly have removed him to her own house, had that been possible ; but, to

tell the truth, he was much happier where he was. During his mother's visits not a word was said of their estrangement, but the fact that it had existed gave a certain amount of discomfort to their interviews.

Meantime every inquiry had been made for Annie, with no result whatever. The police, as usual in such cases, confined their researches to the very area where the missing girl was least likely to be found, and again and again Bufton and Leroy were summoned to inspect the remains of some miserable castaway who had been found drowned in the Great River. Bess, however, firmly persisted that the last thing Annie would do would be to take her own life.

To make absolutely sure that Annie had not returned to her old home, Bufton had written to Job Endell, and had received a reply expressing surprise at the inquiry, and stating that nothing had been seen there of the girl since she had left on her visit to London. At this very time, however, Annie was living at the Lobster Smack, and the old man and woman were taking measures to reconcile her with her husband. With this object in view, they had resolved to plead ignorance as to her whereabouts, and to throw her London friends completely off the scent. Their ruse was successful, no one at the studio thinking it necessary to

go in person to Canvey, with the view of verifying in person the truth of Endell's communication.

With his characteristic impetuosity, Somerset fretted through his convalescence like a spoiled child, and his friends had all their work to do to restrain him from continuing the search personally before he was strong enough to get about.

He was sitting one afternoon in his chair, and dozing over a new number of Dickens which had just come out, when Annie walked quietly into the studio. The two men were out, Bess was sitting near to the invalid busy on some needlework, when the missing girl appeared. Bess screamed out, and Somerset started and sprang up as if he had been shot ; then, with a low cry, fell back fainting. In a moment Annie was bending over him, her arms round his neck.

‘Look up! Speak to me, dear!’ she cried.
‘Oh, Bess, I’ve killed him!’

Bess, who was hysterically weeping, gently interposed, and drew her friend’s arms away.

‘He’s not strong yet,’ she murmured, ‘and he’s been grieving so about you. Oh, Annie, you’ve frightened us all to death! Wherever have you been?’

At this moment Somerset opened his eyes, and, heaving a heavy sigh, looked eagerly at Annie.

‘Then it is you?’ he murmured. ‘Thank God!’

She was at his feet now, kneeling and kissing his hands.

‘He told me that he had killed you,’ she sobbed. ‘That is why I came back! But you live—you live! Forgive me for being so unkind to you! Forgive me! Forgive me!’

His eyes were fixed upon her face, tenderly though inquiringly.

‘Then you have been with him? You are reconciled?’

She laughed—a thin, faint laugh that was more like a sob.

‘I’ve been down at the old place,’ she said—‘on Canvey Island. Something drew me there, God knows what, and it was there he found me; but now we’re parted, and I shall never, never see his face again.’

Again Bess interposed and warned Annie that the invalid was only just convalescent, and that any violent emotion might indefinitely retard his recovery. Annie took the hint at once and became very gentle and subdued. But she quickly divested herself of her hat and cloak, and prepared to take her place as nurse by her lover’s side, as if she had a perfect right to occupy that position.

Poor little Bess, whose notions of love and duty were sadly conventional, felt very uneasy. She could not forget that Annie was still a married

woman, and that her presence in the sick-room was, under the circumstances, a breach of the proprieties. She did not dare to say as much, but both her looks and her words betrayed her discomfort. Somerset himself, moreover, seemed somewhat constrained and reserved. He, too, felt that the situation was one of no little difficulty.

A little time after Annie's arrival Mrs. Somerset came to pay her daily visit to her son. She found Annie seated at the young man's side, holding his hand, while he lay back in his chair with half-closed eyes. She said nothing, but her face grew hard and severe, and it was with difficulty that she suppressed her indignation. After a little while she kissed her son and took her leave, but as she left the studio she exchanged looks with Bess, who followed her to the door.

'Is that person going to remain?' she demanded, as they stood in the open air together.

Bess trembled and her eyes were full of tears.

'He thought her dead—we all thought so, and that we should never see her again,' she answered somewhat irrelevantly.

'But who is she? And what are the exact relations between them? Her manner is most extraordinary. Only a wife would assume so much authority in a sick-room, and they were actually sitting hand in hand!'

‘They love each other very much,’ answered Bess, sighing heavily, and wiping her eyes.

‘Love each other? Am I to understand that my son, in spite of all my remonstrances, has engaged himself to this girl?’

Bess did not know how to reply. She saw clearly that Mrs. Somerset knew little or nothing of the real facts of the case, and she hesitated to confide them to her. The result, unfortunately, was that the mother drew her own deductions, and assumed the existence of a degrading connection between the stranger and her son. Even had she been informed of the truth, her judgment would in all probability have been equally severe, although she would doubtless have been relieved to hear that Annie was hopelessly bound in the legal sense to another man. Bess did not dare to make a confidante of her, and the worthy lady sailed away haughtily, convinced that her son was indeed in desperate straits, socially and morally as well as physically.

Later in the afternoon Bufton and Leroy returned to the studio and found Annie in the same place by Somerset’s side. They greeted her very kindly and refrained from asking her any questions, but when evening fell, and Annie still remained, Bufton beckoned Bess from the studio, and questioned her as to how matters stood. She told him all she knew.

‘It’s an ugly tangle, little woman,’ he said, ‘and I’m afraid I see more trouble ahead. The girl’s husband is still alive and at any moment he may be following her here. Besides, the world’s so censorious. You’d better let me have a quiet talk to her, and then we shall know how the land lies.’

The quiet talk took place in the open street, while Bess resumed her place at Somerset’s side, and Leroy officiated as assistant nurse in waiting. Bufton and Annie walked up and down under the lamplight for a good hour, and at the end of that time the former had gathered a pretty good notion of what had taken place.

‘He wished me good-bye,’ said Annie, ‘and promised that he’d never trouble me again. I think he’ll keep his word. Oh, Mr. Bufton, he looked miserable! I was so sorry for him!’

‘And so am I,’ grunted the cynic. ‘After all, he’s your husband, and you can’t throw him off like an old glove in order to put on another.’

‘I know that,’ said Annie quietly.

‘Then there’s another thing to be reckoned with : the man may only be lying low in order to see what you’ll do. Although he may have been sincere enough for the time being, the savage in him may emerge again and he again become dangerous. In any case my advice is that, for the

present, at least, you show yourself here as little as possible.'

'I did not mean to stay!' Annie cried. 'I only wanted to find out if Mr. Somerset was safe and well, and then——'

She paused, choking with tears, then added with firmness :

'I will go away at once if you tell me to do so. I don't want to bring more trouble to him, and now that I know that he's alive and—and happy, I don't much care what happens to me.'

'Don't say that, my girl,' said Bufton, placing his hand gently on her arm. 'You're young and strong, and have all the world before you. We must think things carefully over, and see what is to be done. The mischief is that the youngster's so infernally fond of you—as fond as he can be of anything.'

'I'm not sorry for that, sir,' said Annie, her eyes sparkling.

'I dare say not, but it adds to the tangle. If he had more unconventional pluck, I should suggest that you and he should make a bolt of it, and defy worldly opinion altogether. But he isn't knit that way—he has too much of the Snob left in him—and the result in the long-run would be misery to both of you.'

'I shouldn't care for that,' replied Annie, after

a pause. 'I shouldn't care what people thought of me if he cared for me. And at first when the trouble came I thought the way you speak of would be best ; but now, sir, I feel different. I should be dragging him down and disgracing him, and I'll never do that ! Besides, I feel now what I never felt before—I felt that it wouldn't be fair to poor Matt, whose heart I've broken, and who would be ten times more miserable if he heard that Mr. Somerset and I had gone away together.'

'You're a good little girl!' exclaimed Bufton warmly.

It was settled then and there that Annie, now her mind was satisfied as to Somerset's condition, should come to the studio as little as possible. She would stay for a few days with Bess in the lodgings which Bess had taken, and then—ah ! she did not know what would become of her, nor could she think of it without almost breaking down.

When the two girls withdrew and the three men were left alone preparatory to Somerset's retirement for the night, there was a little scene.

'My mind is made up, Billy,' Somerset said very quietly. 'I shall take your advice, and directly I am strong enough go away with Annie to some lonely place where the scandalmonger ceases from troubling and the newsman is at rest.'

'So that's your programme!' muttered Bufton,

while Leroy, who had taken Bess's place by the invalid's chair, blinked not unapprovingly.

'Certainly it is,' replied the young man in his old airy manner; 'or, rather, I ought to say it's the programme of William Bufton, philosopher and A.R.A.'

'I've changed it,' said Bufton. 'You missed the critical moment, and it's too late now. You're going to say good-bye to your Andromeda! If you sail for the Scilly Isles, or elsewhere, she won't go with you.'

'No?' answered Somerset, smiling. 'I think she will. Perhaps your suggestion is that she should return to the Monster and be devoured?'

'The Monster is worth a dozen of Perseus,' cried Bufton, and he thereupon told his friend all that he had heard from Annie—of Matt Watson's strange magnanimity, of his pitiful parting from the woman he loved, and of his extraordinary generosity in offering her everything he possessed. Somerset was startled and impressed.

'Poor devil!' he murmured; then, with a shake of the head and a tremor in his voice, he added: 'Very possibly he'll change his mind; but, in any case, I shan't change mine. He has resigned his claim, however, and Annie is now morally free to do as she pleases.'

'She is still the man's wife,' returned Bufton,

'and she herself now feels that she is bound to him by gratitude, if not by affection. It lies with you whether she is to degrade herself further in her own and the world's opinion, or to make a fool of herself in your company. If you're the man I hope you are, you'll not tempt her. Leave her to decide for herself.'

Several days passed, and Annie came every day to the studio. A great struggle was going on in her heart, as well as in that of her lover ; but the struggle was no longer a stormy one, and reason was gradually subduing impulse. The interviews of the two were now very sweet and peaceful. Not a word was uttered concerning the future. Both Somerset and Annie seemed to feel for the first time that they were meeting on terms of honour, and that any strong exhibition of passion would be disloyal.

At the end of a week Somerset was up and about, in so far as he was able to take some long carriage-drives. Sometimes Annie and Bess accompanied him, at others Bufton or Leroy. On the borders of the little group of Bohemians hovered Mrs. Somerset, like a hen which has discovered that it has hatched a duckling, and is distracted on seeing it take to the water.

The wild winter of that year was drawing to its close, but the weather was still tempestuous and

broken, and February was ushered in with one of the fiercest gales that had ever raged around the English coast. Nearly every morning brought the report of some casualty at sea. Then there came a temporary lull, followed by a recurrence of bad weather. The wind, which had been blowing persistently from the north-east, had suddenly swept round to the south-west, and the full force of the storm was being felt in the English Channel and at the mouth of the Thames.

One night, after Somerset had retired, and Bufton was sitting up alone, Leroy, who had been spending the evening at the club, entered the studio. His face was pale, his manner agitated. He looked wildly at Bufton, put his finger on his lips, and then, after listening for a moment at the closed door of the little room where Somerset was sleeping, produced an evening paper.

‘Read that!’ he whispered, pointing to a portion of the printed page. Bufton took the newspaper, and read as follows, in a column headed ‘The Great Gale’:

‘All along the Essex coast the storm raged in its greatest fury from Harwich to Brightlingsea, and thence along the English Channel. Innumerable casualties are recorded. An account will be found in another column of the total loss of a Norwegian merchantman on the Goodwins. For-

tunately, the lifeboat was in readiness, and no lives were lost. At the mouth of the Thames, however, a terrible calamity occurred. Late last night signals of distress were seen from a large vessel which had been driven on to the dangerous sands of Shoeburyness. The sea was rolling mountains high, and the people of the district crowding on the shore saw, amid fitful gleams of moonlight, the waves sweeping over the doomed ship and gradually breaking her to pieces. Many of the poor souls on board had already been swept away; the survivors had taken refuge in the rigging, and appeared to be frantically gesticulating to the spectators on shore. Two or three attempts had been made to launch the lifeboat, but the seas were terrific and the crew short-handed. At last one or two fishermen from Leigh volunteered. Among them was a seafaring man who had been living for some time in the neighbourhood. To this man, more than any of the rest, the successful launching of the boat was due; for he not only encouraged the men when they shrank back, but forwarded their brave work with what seemed a giant's strength. On coming near the doomed vessel, however, it was found impossible to approach close enough to take off the survivors on board. It was then that the man we have already mentioned volunteered to swim to the wreck with a cord communicating with the

lifeboat; and this feat of heroism he actually accomplished, with the result that the life-saving apparatus, rope and cradle, was attached to the rigging, and one by one the shipwrecked persons were passed on to the lifeboat, which hung by. Several persons perished, but the majority, fifteen souls in all, were saved. The man to whom, under Providence, they owed their lives was the last to leave the vessel, and he had just sprung towards the cradle when the entire wreck broke up, and he was swept into the sea. A little later he was picked up by the lifeboat near the spot where the wreck had disappeared; he was still living, but dangerously wounded, having been struck by a fragment of the splintered mast, and before the lifeboat reached the shore he was a dead man.

‘LATER PARTICULARS. — On inquiry this morning, we have learned that the name of the courageous sailor who lost his life last night while aiding the heroic efforts of the lifeboat’s men was Matthew Watson, and that he was a native of Gravesend. He had only recently returned from America, where he had gained a not inconsiderable fortune at the gold-diggings, and had been on a visit to some relations on Canvey Island.’

Bufton and Leroy looked at each other, too touched and stupefied to utter a word.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

MORE honoured and beloved in his death than in his life, Matt Watson—or, if we must use the horrible phrase current in modern newspapers, his 'remains'—lay cold and confined in one of the rooms of a little inn on the shore at Leigh. He had been carried there under the direction of Job Endell; for he was to be buried in Leigh Churchyard, almost within a stone's-throw of the estuary of the Great River. The rumour of his heroism had spread all over the neighbourhood, and crowds of seamen, fishermen, and country-folk of both sexes filled the narrow streets of the little shrimping village, and passed through the room which was being used as a mortuary.

Early in the afternoon of the day after the news had reached the studio Annie had arrived at Shobery, accompanied by Bufton and Leroy.

Somerset would have also been one of the party, but a little reflection had shown him that it would be more delicate and wise to stay away. From Shoeburyness the three had driven on to Leigh, and almost the first person they encountered on entering the village was Job Endell.

In answer to their inquiries, the old man described somewhat garrulously the course of events which had culminated in the sailor's heroism and tragic death. His manner towards Annie was a little reproachful, yet not unsympathetic.

'Arter you left that day,' he said, without alluding further to the circumstances which had led to the parting, 'me and the old woman come back to the Lobster Smack, and found Matt sitting alone by the fire; and when he told us you'd parted, the missis she begun to cry out against 'e; for she was angry, Annie, and thought you should have stayed with him you'd married. But Matt bade her be quiet, and told her straight that you'd gone away with his own free-will and consent. He seemed dazed like and wonderful quiet, like a man who's had a knock-down blow. Poor chap! he was dreadful cut up in his 'art, for he was fonder o' you, Annie, than of his own life.'

'I know that!' cried Annie, sobbing. 'I shall never forgive myself for leaving him as I did.'

‘Well, he kept quiet like that for the whole day and the night arter; and what was curious to me, knowing his ways, he never took a drop o’ drink. Next mornin’ he axed me to go over with him to Gravesend, and o’ course I went; and what do you think it was for? ’Twas to see the lawyer, and to fix it all right about his money, my dear. It’s all yourn still, Annie—left to you in a will quite reg’lar; and he didn’t forget me neither, nor my old woman, tho’ he’d remembered us afore. Ah, he was the right sort, was Matt Watson; and though it was allus a word and a blow with him, he bore malice to no man, and never forgot his friends.’

‘After that?’ interposed Bufton, seeing that Annie was too distressed to speak.

‘Arter that, I says to him, “Mate,” says I, “shall I go arter Annie, and talk to her, and try and persuade her to come back? She’s only a gel,” says I, “and p’r’aps she don’t know her own mind.” Well, he wouldn’t hear o’ that—he was too proud, though I could see he was downright miserable and lonesome. Then I axed him what he meant to do. He wasn’t quite clear about that, but I think he’d a notion of going back to sea, and never coming home no more.’

Job paused. They had been walking on slowly together, and were now near the door of the little inn on the water-side.

‘Well, we went back to Canvey together, and my old woman did all she could to cheer him up, as if she’d been his own mother. He didn’t seem to fret much, but he’d talk werry little, and he’d sit for hours smoking and looking at the fire. Most days he’d go walking alone all over the island, and strolling along the sea-wall and looking out at the sea, and sometimes he was out almost till break o’ day. The night the big storm came he didn’t come back at all, and me and the missis was terrible anxious, fearing some harm might ha’ come to him. Then at last we got news that he’d been away down at Shoebury, and there I found him yesterday—leastways, what was left of him—lying dead and broken on the seashore.’

They entered the crowded inn. It was speedily whispered round that Annie was closely related to the deceased man, so folk made way for her, and she was shown at once into the room where Matt was lying. Leroy was following, but Bufton drew him softly back.

‘Leave them alone,’ Bufton whispered; ‘our place isn’t there now they’re having their last meeting.’ He added, as he walked with Leroy to the outer door of the inn: ‘A new turn to the old fable, isn’t it? This time Andromeda is a modern missie, our friend Perseus a bit of a prig, but the Monster has turned out to be a Man.’

Meanwhile Annie stood alone in the death-room, looking down sadly through a mist of tears on the face of Matt Watson.

As the mist cleared away and she saw more clearly, she was astonished and awestruck at what she beheld ; for it seemed to her that the darkness of years had passed, and the face she looked upon was quite young, just as she remembered it when a child. How peaceful Matt looked ! how thoughtful and still ! His hair and beard had been smoothed and arranged by some gentle hand ; the wild, weather-beaten features were composed ; the heavy lids lay softly over the dark eyes. He might have been only asleep, he looked so calm. The great rings were still in his ears, and on his waxen hands, which were crossed upon his breast, the tattoo-marks were still faintly visible.

She bent forward and kissed him on the forehead, which was cold as ice. Then her heart seemed to break within her, and she knelt by the coffin sobbing pitifully. Her old dread and physical repulsion had passed away for ever. She seemed to have lost her only friend.

THE END.



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